Turning Points
Evaluation of Red Cross Young Parents Program

Dr Rochelle Spencer  
Dr Gillian Vogl

Centre for Research on Social Inclusion  
June 2010
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Dr Rochelle Spencer
Dr Gillian Vogl
Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie University

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY ETHICS APPROVAL HE01MAY2009-R06454

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1. Executive Summary

This report analyses the results of a one year evaluation that was jointly funded by Macquarie University and Red Cross through the Macquarie University External Collaborative Grant Scheme. Young Parents Program is a three staged transition program that provides a holistic, strengths-based perspective towards early intervention with a focus on family restoration and preservation. It aims to develop the capacities of young parents to live independently in secure housing and to parent successfully.

The undertaking of this evaluation provides Young Parents Program the opportunity to improve their knowledge of the work that they are doing and fits with their aim to develop a culture that is focused on continual improvement and reflective learning that enables future planning and quality outcomes. The purpose of this evaluation was to evaluate the efficacy of Red Cross Young Parents Program in building the capacities of young parents to successfully parent their children independently.

The methodology adopted in this evaluation is underpinned by a narrative inquiry framework that includes the collection of informal conversations, exploratory interviews and participant observation, providing insights into what being involved in an early intervention program means to young parents and identifying the impact that they perceive their involvement in the program has had on their lives. Vignettes of strengths-based practice throughout the report illustrate such elements in practice and the subsequent outcomes. A qualitative perspective is employed in order to provide the researchers’ with an in depth understanding of the program from the perspective of the young parents, the staff and volunteers at Young Parents Program.

Findings from this research suggest that integral to the success of this program are the following key findings:

- The dynamic nature of the program where there is a continual focus on building the skills of staff to deal with more diverse and more ‘at risk’ clients with challenging behaviours;
- The twelve month Residential phase of the program is an essential component for working with the most disadvantaged and ‘at risk’ clients;
- The collaborative ways in which the program works with NSW Community Services and other services in joined up ways;
- The community hub of support that has been developed around the Residential component.

Key challenges include:

- The provision of residential spaces that are more appropriate for two-parent families;
- The appointment of male workers;
- The sustainable employment of Indigenous workers;
- A focus on developing the capacities of the children as well as their parents.
2. Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge Macquarie University and Red Cross for funding this research through the Macquarie University External Collaborative Grant Scheme.

A special thanks to the clients who generously allowed the researchers to gain insights into their lives.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the volunteers who kindly gave of their time to participate in interviews.

Lastly, we would like to thank the staff at Young Parents Program. The staff, encouraged by the Program Manager Anne King, facilitated an open and transparent environment for the research to proceed in the true spirit of research collaboration, which is of credit to them when the program was laid open for scrutiny. We appreciate their availability when we needed to talk through particular issues about the research to gain further insight. Anne King and her teams’ astute and discerning capacity to grapple with the key themes raised by the research guaranteed that many of the interviews turned into long insightful and intellectual conversations.
3. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations from the ground up research of a one year qualitative evaluation of Red Cross Young Parents Program. Young Parents Program model is underpinned by the notion that the challenges faced by vulnerable and disadvantaged families require multiple and complex responses. Young Parents Program clients are offered a range of services and supports such as case management, home visiting from qualified caseworkers, parenting programs, education for training assistance, and subsidised childcare. Access to subsidised childcare in particular, enables young parents participating in Young Parents Program to be supported in developing parenting skills, accessing community services and acquiring the competence necessary to undertaking study and gaining employment. It is the aim of Young Parents Program to effect real and sustainable change for client families through a strengths-based capacity building model.

The purpose of Young Parents Program evaluation was to collect narrative accounts that would provide insights into what being involved in an early intervention program means to young parents and to identify the impact that they perceive their involvement in the program has had on their lives. Vignettes of strengths-based practice are provided to illustrate such elements in practice and the subsequent outcomes.

Additionally, three short narrative excerpts of the life stories of young women who become involved in Young Parents Program are presented. They are intended to create more in-depth and holistic impressions of the experiences faced by young parents and to highlight some of the turning points that have occurred by participation in Young Parents Program. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the clients in Young Parents Program and to de-identify the young parents who participated in the research, the narratives are not focused specifically on the experiences of three clients but have instead incorporated elements and experiences of a number of clients with the intention of adding depth to the qualitative research throughout this report. This is a technique that follows on from the work of Richard Sennett (1999: 11); disguising individual identities by “compounding several voices into one or splitting one voice into many”. The use of narrative illustrates the diverse reasons that young parents become involved in Young Parents Program, their experiences of the program and the impact of the program on the development of their capacities to successfully parent their children.

The evaluation plan aimed to assess the perceptions of the young parent clients, Young Parents Program staff and volunteers as to the extent to which key processes and services are making a difference in the lives of the young parents particularly with regard to successful parenting of their child. The evaluation emphasises what works for young families
highlighting questions about what is effective about Young Parents Program, for whom and why?

Background
Young Parents Program provides a structured yet reflexive and dynamic unique holistic model of best practice that takes a strengths-based early intervention approach to family restoration aimed to build the capacities of the young parents to live independently in secure housing and parent successfully.

Young Parents Program is a three stage transition program that provides accommodation, support and educational services to pregnant and parenting young parents under the age of twenty-five in New South Wales, Australia. Nearly all of the young women who enter Young Parents Program have experienced poverty and abuse and often that abuse has been perpetrated by those closest to them. The young parents receive housing, counselling, life skills training, parenting education and education/training. Objectives of Young Parents Program relate to improved social and emotional development, health, ability to learn and strengthening families with the ultimate goal to keep families together. The preferred outcomes of Young Parents Program include a focus on completion of high school, improved parenting skills and a greater bond between parent and child, and a greater capacity to live independently. Young Parents Program aims to facilitate the restoration of children to young parents who wish to, and have the capacity, to parent with support.

Pregnant or parenting women under the age of nineteen who require intensive support live at Young Parents Program with their child for up to twelve months, during which time they (sometimes with their partners) engage in an education or employment training program, develop independent living skills, and learn to be nurturing to their child. Once the young mothers have successfully completed the first stage of Young Parents Program, they can transition to the Outreach phase where clients are able to live in their own apartment with
their child and still receive intensive support and case management. These clients can stay in this apartment for up to two years, at which point, they can live independently and seek ongoing support through the Aftercare workers at Young Parents Program. Aftercare provides the young parents with a safety net to facilitate their successful transition into independent living with their children. This spectrum of support enables clients to receive a comprehensive array of supports over an extended period.

Young Parents Program is funded through a variety of avenues including NSW Community Services (formerly Department of Community Services), Department of Health, Randwick Council, and a range of trusts and foundations. Since becoming accredited by the Office of the Children’s Guardian as an out-of-home care service provider, Young Parents Program has gained significant government funding (Dias, King and Mackey 2009: 4)

**Residential Clients**

Residential clients pay a $100 bond and a weekly board of $125 if parenting and $75 if pregnant. They receive a weekly shopping allowance of $40 to be used to purchase fresh healthy food. As part of their case plan, their case manager, allocated in the first week of their stay, assists them to budget for other necessary items such as formula, nappies, toiletries and mobile phone credit. Residential clients are expected to attend all workshops, meetings and appointments as part of their case plan. They attend compulsory groups including: a house meeting on Monday mornings to negotiate the cleaning roster for the week ahead; group cleaning on Tuesdays; two hour evening study sessions with volunteer tutors every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday; a therapeutic group with a social worker from Prince of Wales Adolescent Unit; education workshops and study sessions on Mondays and Thurs days; playgroup on Tuesday mornings; and parent education workshops on Friday mornings. Occasionally the clients attend compulsory workshops on issues such as domestic violence, protective behaviours, first aid and save-a-mate. Structure, predictability and 24 hour staff support create a safe and stable living environment for young women who may never have lived in a safe place before. This allows the young mothers to learn the importance of routine, consistency, and calm to creating a safe and appropriate environment for babies to develop.

Clients work closely with their case managers to design their case plans and they have weekly reviews to decide if it is suitable for the client. They mutually set goals they would like to achieve while in Young Parents Program. The case manager offers support and encouragement in educational and personal development interests. Residential clients are strongly encouraged and supported to eat a healthy diet and develop good nutritional practices. Staff members are available at meal times to support young parents in feeding their child and parents are encouraged to work with their case manager to develop a baby’s feeding routine. Parents are responsible for preparing all meals for their child. Each resident purchases their own groceries weekly. Staff members are also available to support residents
in this activity if required. While fathers are not permitted to live or stay overnight at the Residence they are encouraged to visit and participate in workshops and daily parenting activities such as assisting with bathing and settling upstairs with staff supervision and can be themselves allocated a case manager and receive case management to develop their parenting and life skills.

Outreach Clients
With the exception of clients who transition from Residential, Outreach clients are mostly voluntary and referred from women’s refuges and other services. Outreach clients enter into a 24 month contract where community housing is sourced for the clients during this period and they agree to three monthly inspections of the premises to ensure the house is kept in safe and good order. They agree to enter into a case plan necessitating active participation in positive, constructive self development activities (such as study, employment, personal development courses, counselling and other personal development activities). Housing is provided through NSW Housing, Bridge Housing Association, Churches Community Housing, Compass Housing Services, Affordable Community Housing, and Pacific Link Community Housing Association. Outreach clients receive continued support through weekly case meetings. The Outreach program currently operates in Eastern Sydney, Metropolitan Sydney, Greater Western Sydney, and the Central Coast of NSW. It is proposed to expand Outreach services to the South Coast of NSW in July 2010 (Dias et al. 2009: 10-11).

Aftercare Clients
Aftercare Clients have been involved in either or both the Residential and/or Outreach phases of Young Parents Program and volunteer to participate in Aftercare. Clients can participate in Aftercare until the age of twenty-five and under. Aftercare offers support and referral, contact once every three months and involves some funding. The aim of Aftercare is to assist families to maintain independence, health and wellbeing in the community. Whether or not their children remain in care, clients can continue to receive emotional and practical support through Aftercare and referrals. Depending on the client’s needs, the Aftercare Coordinators meet with clients following their transition at least every three months and more frequently if needed over a two year period. The young parents are encouraged to attend programs and social activities to keep them linked in to friendship and support networks (Dias et al. 2009: 12).

The Program
Young Parents Program receives over twenty referrals a month from across NSW and sometimes interstate. Referrals largely come from within Sydney followed by the Central Coast and Wollongong either through self referral or by refuges, hospitals, youth services or NSW Community Services. They are interviewed to assess the suitability of the program for
the parent and their children. Referral to either Residential or Outreach depends on a number of factors including their age and their level of need. Residential is able to accommodate young women with complex needs who require high levels of support and intensive family preservation work. Outreach clients tend to be older, and require early intervention. Once clients in Residential have developed their capacities they can transition into Outreach.

Staff at Young Parents Program come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and include eight case managers, nine support workers, two Aftercare workers, an education officer, education tutor, parentcraft worker, volunteer coordinator, two team leaders and a program manager, along with an increasing team of 75 volunteers (Dias et al. 2009: 15). The staff bring a myriad of qualifications to the program including social work, social sciences, human services, welfare, psychology, youth work, child and family therapy, counselling, social inquiry, health, disability, early childhood teaching, training and assessment, marketing and community development ranging from diploma to postgraduate levels (Dias et al. 2009).

Organisational capacity building takes place in a number of ways including training in child protection, behaviour management, case management, motivational interviewing and behaviour change techniques, strengths-based practice and parentcraft. An important and significant capacity building initiative that builds individual staff and organisational capacity involves an external consultant psychologist supervising the team in groups and individually. Case discussion, problem solving, group and individual learning are workshopped within these sessions providing an opportunity for staff to identify their own limitations for working optimally with clients and to identify gaps in skills and support needed (Dias et al. 2009).

In order to be successful in the capacity building approach it is imperative to monitor and regularly assess whether the methods implemented result in positive outcomes. This is achieved through daily case noting and monthly case reviews for Residential clients and three monthly for Outreach clients to review progress and develop case plans to identify goals and strategies and how monitoring will take place to observe how both parent and child are progressing. In addition, all relevant professional people involved with a client attend a case conference each review period. Clients have access to their case notes and are encouraged to write their own comments and reflections, which facilitate processes towards self determination (Dias et al. 2009).

In line with monitoring capacity building, Young Parents Program is monitored through frequent audits by the Office of the Children’s Guardian. Undergoing regular audits fosters a culture where Young Parents Program accords closely with guidelines of the Office of the Children’s Guardian. These ongoing audits and the internal reviews from client feedback are
intended to build the capacity of the program through ongoing external and internal monitoring and evaluation.

This partnership between Red Cross Young Parents Program and the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion has been collaborative, transparent and organic. This research will contribute to the development of an evidence-base for social inclusion outcomes of young parents who participate in a capacity building young parents program. According to Simpson et al. (2003:278), “community development projects that lack long-term vision, that are under-resourced (both financially and in terms of working with local social infrastructure), and that are not truly inclusive of individuals right across the community are unlikely to enjoy long-term success”.

**Conceptual Approach – social inclusion through capacity building**

Community capacity building has become a central objective in a wide range of public policies and programs in Australia. The capacity building approach is defined as building infrastructure to deliver programs; building partnerships with the community sector to help sustain programs and positive outcomes; building problem-solving capability in communities to ensure appropriate responses to new problems in unfamiliar contexts (Hawe et al. 2000). The outcome sought through a capacity building approach is a mobilisation of community knowledge, skills, financial resources, personal networks, stronger community relationships, increased number of locally based opportunities and enthusiasm for the development of one’s community (Hawe et al. 2000).

The concept of capacity building has received increased attention from academics and practitioners alike. It features in debates about community development, social capital and social cohesion (Social Exclusion Unit 2000, Banks and Shenton 2001). This shift towards a capacity building approach emphasises leadership, participation, and empowerment within the community (Simpson et al. 2003).

While many commentators believe ‘bottom-up’ locally based approaches lead to more socially inclusive policies and community wellbeing (Popham 1996, Schuftan 1996), capacity building schemes have also been criticised precisely for offering a neo-liberal governance strategy that sees community development shift from state to civil responsibility. For Levitas (2000:196) capacity building can be considered a way of expecting disadvantaged and poorly resourced people “to pull themselves up by their collective bootstraps”. However, many consider community capacity building, in particular, as a means for providing people with opportunities to become empowered (Healey 1998:18).

Community capacity building, as both concept and strategy, is relevant to individuals and communities as evidenced in discussions around social capital and the third sector. Social
capital has gained increasing importance and is closely tied to notions of capacity building through the concepts of social cohesion, empowerment and social inclusion (Forrest and Kearns 2001; Social Exclusion Unit 2000). Social capital is seen as the foundation on which a community’s ability to develop is built. Communities that are low in social cohesion are unable to take advantage of opportunities that arise. The work of Putnam (1993, 1995), Cox (1995, 1997), Fukuyama (1995) and Bourdieu (1984), to name only a few, has added substantially to the international dialogue on social capital relating to community wellbeing. There is still much discussion around definitions of social capital but there is consensus that it includes concepts such as trust, norms, social networks, empowerment, community participation and civic engagement (Bourdieu 1984, Putnam 1993, Fukuyama 1995, Cuthill 2003, ABS 2000).

The idea of social exclusion is important here because it refers to the connectedness of social problems and how they are often linked to the way in which groups and institutions may actively exclude individuals and particular communities from mainstream social and economic life. In these instances, a series of interrelated social problems may emerge including unemployment, low levels of education, low incomes, welfare dependency, poor health, physical isolation, criminal activity, and inadequate provision of services. Often these problems have strong geographical dimensions (Vincent 2008), such as low income enclaves, housing estates which may be isolated or poor quality and lead to secondary problems (Meegan and Mitchell 2001). Capacity building can be employed to build the social capital such as levels of trust, social connectedness, resilience and enterprise, including the ability to join together in common crisis, civic engagement and the strengthening of local networks (Atkinson and Willis, 2006). This model adopts a proactive approach based on an assumption that communities which have an active and spirited citizenry will be robust and vibrant, more caring and have fewer social problems (Halpern 1999). Wider participation in community life is seen to contribute to building positive relationships based on trust and reciprocity between individuals, families and communities where local people become active agents of social change (Putnam 1993).

4. Methodology

Methodological Approach
A qualitative evaluation framework was selected for the purposes of undertaking this evaluation for a number of reasons. First, it was decided that a qualitative framework was best suited to the nature of the program.

Social programs are experienced differently by participants with each undoubtedly viewing objectives, implementation and achievement differently (Sharkey and Sharples 2008) highlighting that there is no single reality in social programs. Thus, evaluations of such
programs should acknowledge pluralistic views and values. Often referred to as naturalistic approaches to evaluation, they typically value meaning and interpretation as experienced in the real world (Brewer 2003).

The aim of using a qualitative framework in which to assess the efficacy of Young Parents Program is that qualitative inquiry provides an in depth understanding of people’s experiences, perspectives, and histories in the context of their personal circumstances or settings (Spencer et al. 2003). The purpose of a qualitative evaluation is to explore phenomena from the views of those being studied. Qualitative inquiry relies on employing unstructured methods which are sensitive to the social context of the study enabling researchers to grasp data which is detailed, rich and complex. The research questions explored within this inductive method focus on answering questions such as “what is?, “how?” and “why?” (Spencer et al. 2003).

Second, due to the nature of the program it was imperative that the researchers were able to develop a good rapport with the participants of the research including the young parents, staff and volunteers. A relationship of understanding, empathy and trust was crucial in negotiating access to the program clients, staff and volunteers. Building rapport allowed the researchers to develop relationships (social capital bonding) and make connections and understand the operating dynamics within Young Parents Program.

Qualitative evaluation relies on a mixture of methods including exploratory interviews, focus groups, conversations and participant observation. In the evaluation of this project the researchers’ relied on exploratory interviews, conversations and participant observation.

**Participant Observation and Conversation**

Undertaking participant observation and informal conversations involved a researcher visiting Young Parents Program every Tuesday and attending playgroup. This allowed the researcher to interact with the clients and their children, the volunteers and staff in an informal manner over an extended period. This was profoundly important to the research as it built familiarity and trust between the researcher and the clients who typically will not readily trust new people. The role of empathetic listening is an important aspect of rapport building (Sharkey and Sharples 2008). Research participants need to feel that their role in the research is valuable, that is, that the information and time they provide to the researchers is valued.

In addition to visiting the Tuesday playgroup, the same researcher visited Outreach clients with their case managers and attended two education sessions; one at Randwick and the other at Parramatta. The other researcher attended a number of the Parent Education sessions on Friday mornings and meetings with volunteer tutors. Both researchers attended
various meetings and lunches with volunteers and staff with both also spending some evenings with the young parents while they prepared nightly meals for themselves and their children and bathed and put their children to sleep.

**Informal semi-structured interviews**
The other main methodology involved conducting interviews with clients, staff and volunteers. Most clients were happy to be interviewed and the data from the interviews has been supplemented by all the informal and incidental interactions the researchers had with the clients, staff and volunteers. The interviews were transcribed in full and coded into interpretive categories; emerging interpretations were compared and refined in discussion between the researchers. Pseudonyms have been used to protect identities.

Informal exploratory interviews were carried out with the manager, one of the team leaders, an Aftercare worker, two case managers, a support worker, the parentcraft worker, the education officer, the volunteer coordinator, two volunteers and nine young parents. This was in addition to many informal conversations with parents and staff.
5. Sally’s Story
Sally is a seventeen year old Indigenous woman. Sally became involved with NSW Community Services as a result of the violence that she was experiencing from the father of her son and because of her own drug abuse. NSW Community Services told Sally that she needed to choose between her relationship or her four month old son, Tom, and that in order to keep her son she needed to attend Young Parents Program. She also regularly had to undergo urine tests prior to entering the program to prove that she was no longer taking drugs.

Sally hated the violence that she experienced at the hands of her partner but says it wasn’t like that all the time. Sally was very in love with Tom’s father and quite dependent on him emotionally but she also desperately didn’t want to lose Tom. The decision to give up her relationship and enter Young Parents Program was difficult; although she definitely felt a bond with Tom, it was quite exhausting looking after a four month old baby. As a result Sally felt conflicted over the responsibility and lack of freedom that came with being a parent and the bond that she felt towards Tom.

Initially, Sally felt totally overwhelmed by Young Parents Program. She hated not being able to go out whenever she liked and initially she was not allowed to leave the residence without a caseworker. She found all the rules quite difficult as she was used to doing whatever she wanted. She also hated all the paper work that she had to fill out and found this hard to carry out sometimes when she was trying also to look after Tom. Sally also liked everything to be really neat and clean and the messiness of some of the other clients annoyed her. While all the clients were expected to clean up after themselves and partake in chores, she felt that some didn’t keep things to a level that she felt was appropriate and she approached staff about handing out consequences to the clients that she felt weren’t doing their fair share. One of the clients was also stealing her food and she was relieved when that client left a few weeks after she came to the program.

After the first month, Sally started to adapt to the rules of the program and gradually was allowed more independence. Her adaptation to the program was facilitated to an extent by Emma’s arrival. Emma has a six month old baby girl and Sally and Emma developed a strong bond with one another quite quickly. Sally enjoyed outings with Emma and having someone close to her that was also a parent in a similar situation. This helped to make all the parenting responsibilities seem a little easier. Sally still missed Tom’s father and felt quite a bit of angst when she lost contact with him and didn’t know where he had gone. She felt particularly upset on his birthday. However, she also knew that she had been strong and that Tom would hopefully one day recognise what sacrifices she had made to keep him.
Over the months, Sally developed a number of trusting relationships with the workers and Young Parents Program came to feel more and more like a home. She was surprised by her trust and the bonds that she developed with the workers as she had always found it hard to trust people as a result of past negative relationships. She enjoyed having people to talk to and being able to get advice about Tom when she needed it. She received a lot of guidance from the parent craft worker over Tom’s sleeping problems and was able to get Tom into more of a routine.

Sally was quite dubious when she initially entered the education part of the program as she had very negative experiences of education in the past and naturally felt very insecure about her abilities with regard to learning. She had only finished high school up to the end of year eight and for the most part of year seven and year eight she has truanted frequently. While she was initially very nervous about the education, she began to slowly enjoy the learning and started to do quite well and enjoyed the sense of achievement. It was the first time anyone had ever told her that she was intelligent. Sally successfully completed year ten through the accelerated learning program and decided that on completion she wanted to do year eleven at TAFE. Sally thought that perhaps one day she would like to be a youth worker. Prior to entering Young Parents Program, Sally had never thought about a career.

One of Sally’s favourite activities was the swimming lessons that a Young Parents Program volunteer provided for Tom. Sally also enjoyed the driving lessons that another volunteer provided in the Young Parents Program car and thought that one day she might like to have her own car as this would make travelling with Tom a lot easier. It had been difficult travelling with Tom before, getting the pram on and off the bus and sometimes not being able to catch a particular bus because there was nowhere on the bus to put her pram. She decided that she would also really like to rent her own place one day rather than live in public housing.

Previously, Sally had not cooked a lot and another one of the skills she developed from being at the program was cooking. On one of the days, Sally had bought spaghetti to cook and it was taking a long time as she had chosen gluten free spaghetti as she thought that this was probably healthier. Laura the case manager that was on duty that night, told Sally that unless she had a special need for gluten free products she was better not to buy them as they could be high in sugar and therefore aren’t always the best choice. She missed the junk food that she has been able to eat before the program as she was not allowed junk food at Young Parents Program and she thought that once she was transitioned into Outreach she would probably have some junk food at home again but that she would also try and have healthy food as this would set a good example for Tom.
She also quite enjoyed learning better how to budget her money. She recognised that now she was confident to take care of herself and her son on a budget and how important these skills have been for her.

While at times, she didn’t enjoy the compulsory programs and didn’t understand why she had to attend the playgroup while Tom was so little and couldn’t really play any way, she liked some of the playgroup sessions where she got to do craft with the other parents and particularly liked a session where they made plaster moulds of their babies hands and feet. Tom really enjoyed having his feet in the plaster. She made an extra mould of one of Tom’s feet to give to her mother.

One of the best things for Sally about the program was that she came to believe that she really was capable of looking after Tom. She had always felt before that she couldn’t really be a good mother and that she would always be dependent on other people for help but while she appreciated all the support from the workers, she came to feel that once she did leave the program that she would be able to manage to parent Tom on her own.
6. The Program

I want Skye (daughter) to go to a good school and get a good education ... and raise her really well so she is a smart young lady and doesn’t go through things that I went through, so kind of warn her so she doesn’t get herself into a lot of the things that I did. I want to get my career, I want to be a psychologist; something I’ve wanted to do for a long time. So it would be really good to see myself get there and most importantly be a good parent. I want to succeed in being the best parent I can - young parent

Keryn was a perfect example, coming in from being on the streets, being an ICE addict, had very limited living skills, hadn’t budgeted, hadn’t cooked, hadn’t had to clean, when she left she had saved $8000. She is a wonderful mum - staff member

Recently, there has been a conceptual shift in approaches to child protection from tertiary dominated intervention to a more prevention focused model. Thus there has been a move towards models more similar to those in countries such as Sweden, which are focused on putting in place measures and resources to allow for family preservation. Within these more integrated models, there is a more holistic focus on education, social and other services being responsible for the implementation of measures at an earlier stage to build the capacities of parents to minimize risks to the child (Scott 2009; Khoo et al. 2002, DoCS 2008) and to keep families together. Research shows that once removed from their families, children often end up in multiple foster placements resulting in negative longer term outcomes for them (Scott 2009).

Strengthening parenting skills and competencies is the key objective of many parenting support interventions internationally. These usually fit within overarching aims focused on improving parent-child relationships, increasing successful parenting, and improving child behaviour (Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004). The extensive literature on the effectiveness of parenting skills programs confirms the good outcomes for both parents and for children (Moran et al. 2004). International research over the last decade has demonstrated the importance of early brain development and shown the importance of a stable environment for maximising this development. Recent research has demonstrated the significance of learning abilities for children between the ages of 0-6 and the importance of building the capacities of parents to invest in their children (Esping-Andersen 2008). Young Parents Program is therefore paving the way in Australia as a leader of this holistic early intervention approach as it provides a unique model in the Australian context.
I am particularly interested in working with young people, adolescents, family relationship, children and child protection so it is really the perfect clientele. I really like the client group. I think they are challenging but there is also a lot of rewards and doing early intervention work is great because there is more of a chance of change and you can really effect these families lives earlier on and produce positive outcomes for their children - staff member

A. Parenting and Family Preservation

Young Parents Program is a program focused on family preservation. For many parenting youth, Young Parents Program provides them with the only opportunity for their children to remain in their care. Throughout this research it was apparent that while the safety and wellbeing of the child is always prioritised, staff put ongoing effort into building the capacities of the young parents to make it possible for them to successfully parent their children. Staff members are acutely aware that for many of these young parents, this is the last option for their children to remain in their care. A key challenge for Young Parents Program is effectively managing risk to give vulnerable young people every possible opportunity to parent without exposing their child to neglect or abuse. The research reveals that Young Parents Program does not aim to be complicit in child removals. Their role is to write objective daily case notes about the client and their child. It is the role of NSW Community Services to decide if the child is at significant risk of harm and the responsibility of the Children’s Court of NSW to decide what placement choices are in the best interests of the child.

We have a really strong relationship with NSW Community Services. There is a lot of trust in the program... the program is prioritising the child and there are a lot of supports here. It is a really intensively supported environment so we can work with risk for quite a while here so we are able to avoid unnecessary removal I think - staff member

Where children do end up being removed from their parents, staff work closely with the young parents and NSW Community Services to ensure that in many cases they have a say in where their children go. Young Parents Program staff members demonstrated a deep concern that removal is done in as dignified way as possible with intense support provided to the parent.

Often what we see happening is that because we work so hard on the relationships with the Department, because we’re trying to make sure that we’re all working in the best interest of the
client, we’re always trying to figure out a way for the mum to be as involved as possible. And because the case worker has worked so hard with us and with the client everyone is busting a gut to make things work in the best interest of family preservation - staff member

Walking away from a child, the shame of walking away from a child, it is a really difficult thing. And to want to say to their baby when they grow up, I did everything I could, is really important to a parent I think and they do everything they can that is in their range to do. Sometimes the things they need to change aren’t possible, the pull of the unhealthy relationship or the pull of their own neediness, their own trauma, sometimes they will say they can do it sometimes they will say the program is too hard. Or sometimes they will sabotage their placement in a really obvious way. Letting them have as much control as they possibly can, saying who they want the baby to go to or the circumstances under which they want the baby to go. We advocate really strongly for that, so that it is not an insensitive and fast removal. The removal is done really sensitively and respectfully, so we are able to really advocate for that when NSW Community Services remove. And we have a good strong sensible team who are all able to step up and help make that process happen - staff member

Since the late 1980s, there has been an increase in kinship care as an out-of-home care option. The literature suggests that this trend is likely to continue to increase. Indigenous children are heavily over represented in out-of-home care (DoCS 2007a; McHugh and Valentine 2010). Research about the outcomes of this type of care is relatively nascent, but there is consensus that the factors contributing to the increase in kinship care include the belief that being cared for by family members helps to maintain family ties and importantly culture. Clearly it avoids the distress associated with being placed in unfamiliar environments.

The increasing use of kinship care for Indigenous children is in line with the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. There is no similar placement principle for non-Indigenous children in kinship care even though it too is increasing. In the New South Wales context, kinship care is more common than foster care.

The emerging literature on kinship care reports that differences in child functioning tend to be marginally in favour of children in kinship care (Cuddeback 2004); keeping siblings together may be important for their wellbeing. The research thus far also indicates that being placed in kinship care decreases the risk of placement disruption but that more research is needed to examine placement stability; it is imperative that appropriate placement support be provided to kinship carers. Recent evidence from children living in kinship care suggests that some of its greatest strengths are the reduced stigma compared to foster care, the reduced trauma associated with separation from parents and the broad sense of familial relationships (Messing 2006). Future research into kinship care requires
longitudinal research and perhaps the use of standardised measures to compare those in foster care placements with those in kinship care placements.

Given the high incidence of Indigenous children in kinship care, it should be an imperative to conduct culturally sensitive research into the outcomes for Indigenous children in kinship care placements, focusing on support to carers, placement stability, and education outcomes. The Benevolent Society’s research *A Framework of Practice for Implementing a Kinship Care Program* launched recently by NSW Community Services Minister Linda Burney, outlines a framework of good practice to support the use of kinship care. This is significant for Young Parents Program in that while not complicit in child removals, when NSW Community Services has no option but to remove the child, kinship care is something Young Parents Program might advocate for given these research findings to date. For example, the story of an Indigenous client from a regional centre who had entered the Residential phase of the program and transitioned into the Outreach phase, recently had to decide if she wanted to advocate for her child to go into the care of a family member where she could have regular supervised visits with her, or alternatively, let her daughter go into foster care where she would have up to four supervised visits a year.

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An outreach client who recently went into crisis had her baby removed ... A lot of work went into supporting her and it kind of looks like on the surface that that is another Aboriginal child that has been removed into care but in actual fact she has had intensive support to work on her ability to manage her behaviour and now that child is going to be with family, she will still have really regular access to the baby; it's actually really still a very good outcome and maybe the best outcome that was possible. If she hadn’t come through Residential I don’t think she would be able to be involved in any way, but presently it’s looking like she will still be able to be involved with her child. In time, she may well get the child back into her care - staff member
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“Good Enough Parenting”, Getting into the Program and Early Intervention

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A lot of them have the idea that they want to be good parents and they want to rectify the problems that have happened in their past. Although they are unwilling to be here a lot of them will work with you - staff member
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Evidence suggests that good enough parenting provides the developing child with the opportunity of forming good interpersonal relationships that allows for the capacity for ongoing security throughout life, optimal cerebral development, and successful learning (Sved-Williams 2003).
Young Parents Program operates from a rights-based perspective whereby all parents despite their age or circumstances are entitled to learn to parent their own child, and accordingly it is recognised that all children have the right to a safe and nurturing family setting. The imperative is to teach young parents about the balance between rights and responsibilities and to develop a strong attachment between parents and their children (Dias et al. 2009:7). It is through a capacity building approach that this is partly achieved through role modelling good parenting practice, self soothing, problem-solving and relationship skills. By observing staff, volunteers and older clients modelling healthy relationships and parental warmth, young parents learn how to engage in healthy relationships (Dias et al. 2009:7). Smith Battle (2000) confirms that positive role models used to support and validate emerging understandings of positive parenting strengthen the aspirations of adolescent mothers.

Multiple risk factors in young parents, including poverty, single parenthood, and childhood abuse places an infant at acute risk (Sved-Williams 2003). Through effective assessment and planning, Young Parents Program is able to work with clients from early intervention, family preservation, to high risk clients, providing some of the most vulnerable young parents in the community with the opportunity to parent without placing children at risk.

The aim of the program is to focus on ‘good enough parenting’. An important task of the staff is to provide an environment where the young parents know that it is ok to make mistakes and to demonstrate how they really cope. Due to the constant surveillance and a fear of some parents of having their children removed if they weren’t seen to demonstrate ‘perfect parenting skills’, many of the parents in Residential are initially anxious to ask for help or show that they may not be coping in some way. Staff are careful while accepting this behaviour to simultaneously encourage participants to demonstrate the ‘reality’ of their day-to-day parenting capabilities so that they can build skills and capacities where needed. Staff members believe that learning to ask for help can be a very protective factor.

While some Residential clients have chosen to participate in Young Parents Program because their children would not otherwise be restored, parents enter the program for a number of reasons. These include being homeless, family conflict and wanting to learn parenting skills.

*Me and him became homeless when I was pregnant and we heard of the program through a friend. We gave them a call and they kind a helped us out because we were moving from friend’s place to friend’s place every two weeks. Couldn’t stay at his parents’, couldn’t stay at my parents’ so it was a big smozzle - outreach parent*
Well I was with my ex for like three years and when Toby was about eight months old, we had an AVO in place and he breached it. So I had to make a statement against him and as soon as they read the statement, NSW Community Services put me in a refuge with Toby. Another girl in the refuge with me ended up getting into this program so I applied and I got in which was really cool - outreach parent

I was involved with NSW Community Services for domestic violence and drug abuse. They gave me a choice between leaving my ex partner and coming here or losing my son - residential parent

Bowlby (1969) argues that the first two years of infancy is when a child develops the secure trusting relationship resulting from positive repetitive behaviours between parent and child. By age three the most important elements of attachment development have either successfully occurred or have led to poor development (DoCS 2007b). It is this process that allows for the child to develop capacities to attach to others. In both informal conversations and in the exploratory interviews with the parents, the young parents talked about the importance of the program in not only building their capacities to parent but to bond more affectively with their child. One parent says that it was only since she had been involved in the program that she had been able to really bond with her baby.

Yeah ’cause I am more by myself with him, I am not distracted like I used to be. I used to be very distracted before and since I have been here I am more independent with him. Like I have grown a bond that I never thought I could ever have - residential parent

B. Components of Program

I’m fully behind the education program, I also have to be mindful that if they’re not parenting and if they leave the program because there’s a poor attachment to their child and its needs are not getting met, that education is going out the window and doesn’t mean anything; education might be a catalyst but it usually doesn’t continue. Parenting well is what’s going to keep them in the program and keep them linked to their education. The education is not going to keep them in the program and linked to their child - staff member

Qualitative research highlights that parents respond well to concrete grounded parenting supports, which teach specific skills to use in specific situations and offer practical support to participants (Moran et al. 2004). While Young Parents Program is a holistic model incorporating a number of components focused on building the capacities of the young parents, it is apparent that parenting skills take precedence over other areas of the
program. The rationale for this is based on the idea that Young Parents Program is a parenting program and that the parents’ ability to participate in other components of the program, such as education, is contingent on successful parenting skills. Interestingly, for the majority of young parents in the program who the researchers interviewed or shared informal conversations with, education is for them the component of the program that they best see as offering them and their children future opportunities.

_Education is tangible and it is achievements, it is win, win, win. But when you’re parenting you don’t really see the wins on a daily basis and so they’re much harder, like they just expect their baby’s going to be happy and cuddle them and love them. They don’t see that that’s a result of the incredible work that they’re doing to interact with their baby in an appropriate way and that that comes from the learning and the work that they do, so it’s not the same reward if you like - staff member_

**Parent Education**

... _so while of course these girls are all different from one another, they so share more in common with one another than between them and the general population and advice needs to be tailored in a way that best builds their capacities - staff member_

Parenting education programs are based on the idea that through the provision of education more caring, consistent, positive parenting and supportive environments for children are created (Holzer, Bromfield and Richardson 2006). Key elements of successful programs include structure, strategic interventions and a strengths-based approach. Programs that comprise parenting education around issues such as infant and child development information and concrete services are the most successful (Holzer _et al._ 2006). Research highlights that vulnerability and risk towards children can be successfully reduced through parenting education (Bishop n.d.; Department of Health and Human Services 2002).

Residential, Outreach and Aftercare clients attend regular groups to develop their knowledge around parenting skills. In line with theories that parenting practices can be taught (Sved-Williams 2003), the clients have access to individual support from a parentcraft worker (Dias _et al._ 2009). The Parent Education groups run every Friday in Parramatta, Randwick and Gosford. Internal and external facilitators talk to the young women for 90 minutes about issues such as parenting styles, toilet training, sleep and settle, nutrition, protective behaviours, child development, budgeting, interpersonal relationships, safe sex and contraception, mental health, and self care.
Every fortnight there is a one hour group aimed at parents with children under the age on one called Tot Spot. This is run by the parentcraft worker who is supported by an external clinical nurse educator from NSW Health. Here young parents talk about their experiences of early parenting and have the opportunity to receive child developmental information and have their babies weighed and monitored.

There is a mixed response from the young parents with regard to their perceptions of the importance of various sessions offered at parenting education. Many feel that it is unnecessary to have to attend sessions which they don’t see as relevant to their stage of parenting. One parent with a toddler said she didn’t feel that she gained much from attending sessions on newborns. Her comment perhaps reflects the developmental stage of adolescence – thinking about oneself and living in the moment as a mother with a toddler, rather than thinking about the long term benefits of learning about newborns in case she may have another child one day, or even viewing it as an opportunity to reflect on her own parenting style and experiences when she did have a newborn.

A staff member talked about a couple from Outreach who had not been prioritising the parent education sessions. She said that on a visit to their home she explained to the parents that they needed to attend parentcraft as this was part of the condition that they were given housing. The parents discussed their lack of interest in attending the sessions because they had been trying to balance child rearing with their TAFE commitments. After a long chat with the case manager they agreed that the father would start attending and in fact he was looking forward to the next session on cooking because it is something he enjoys doing. These examples demonstrate that often the clients need some support and prompting about the importance of the educational aspects of the program. Some clients also talked about sessions that they felt were very important in developing their capacities to parent their children.
There was one where they did it on brain development of a child and I thought that was great. Because I have got quite frustrated with Max’s crying and after I did that I started to understand why they cried; just that their brain is not formed properly. And every time he would cry I would just think of that group - residential parent

I really liked the one on drugs and alcohol and the first aid and everything. I like the ones where we get to learn songs with the kids and stuff - outreach parent

Education

I love working with these girls, they just thrive, you just see them grow - staff member

Gaby is great! She has helped me so much ‘cause I was like the guinea pig for the whole TAFE thing ‘cause I told her that I just couldn’t learn through correspondence. I said I want to go to TAFE, can you make this happen. She tried really hard and she spoke to the teachers at TAFE and she got me going for just one subject at first because I am doing year 11 and I started off with English, now I am going for two subjects and doing one correspondence. I love it, I really appreciate the opportunity to go to TAFE because when I was at school I just took it for granted and now I am getting good marks - residential parent

The education component of Young Parents Program supports young parents to identify their interests and accordingly re-engage in education towards developing their career goals. Through this process, self worth and confidence are improved including empowering the young parents to take control of their lives. Paulo Freire’s seminal writing Pedagogy of the Oppressed is largely responsible for the emergence of the empowerment framework. Empowerment is a product of knowledge acquisition which leads one through a process described as follows:

... it enables a person to think, to learn, to gain new skill, to reflect and analyse, to recognise relationships and causality, and ultimately to complete understanding. Knowledge provides the foundation for respecting one’s self worth, for formation of one’s own points of view and opinions, and for building confidence to pursue one’s goals. It builds the capacity for gaining control over one’s own life and life space. (White 2003: 76)

Parenting youth greatly benefit from getting an education which places them in a better position to attempt further training and to gain employment (Sadler et al. 2007). While a complex mesh of intersecting factors contribute to the lower educational attainment of
young adolescent mothers, including social expectations, and the way in which educational programs are structured, teenage mothers are often blamed for their lower educational achievement being portrayed as lazy and welfare dependent (Sosujski et al. 2006). The young women in this research are aware that education and employment are essential if they want themselves and their children to have better lives and to break cycles of homelessness and poverty. However many don’t even know how to fill out a job application let alone what might be expected of them in an interview situation (Meadow-Oliver 2006). They are also aware of the importance of their children receiving a good education and many talked about the importance of wanting their children to go to good schools. Most of these women have very limited reading, mathematics and computer skills. One morning one of the researchers noticed that a young mother who had just given her baby some formula, was unable to work out how much her baby had consumed from the amount of milk left over in the bottle. These day-to-day challenges in parenting highlight that a lack of basic reading and numeracy skills impedes the ability to successfully parent without the assistance of Young Parents Program for many of these young parents.

What they need is life skills, basic skills ... That way education is tailored to the girls’ needs. As soon as somebody comes into the program, I do a literacy and numeracy test and most of them have got poor maths, so I usually do basic skills with them and there is usually a gap between them getting here and getting into TAFE. They just don’t know, Keryn used to say to me ‘when I buy something, I give more money, so they can work out the change rather than me trying to count the right amount out’ - staff member

As part of Young Parents Program, obstacles to learning are identified. The Education Officer indicates that obstacles are often as simple as having their eyes tested, sometimes for the first time, and having reading glasses prescribed. Subsequently the client develops an education plan with the support of the Education Officer. Some clients focus on developing basic maths, reading or writing skills, while others move directly to an appropriate course usually through TAFE or part-time attendance at high school.

Three study sessions are run each week to support clients in their study. Study sessions are facilitated by the Education Officer and volunteer tutors while children are cared for by volunteer childminders. Volunteer tutors also facilitate evening study groups in Residential and when necessary are linked to particular clients to provide intensive one-on-one support. Clients are encouraged to learn study skills and time management strategies that will enable them to study independently in the long term. The research reveals that the education component aims to empower the young parents to pursue their own interests and aspirations. It also has the benefit of placing the young parents in a better position to gain employment in the future. And finally, it aims to encourage young parents to value education and therefore support their children to remain engaged in education. Positive
learning is encouraged through the setting of short term goals and in this way intergenerational cycles of low educational achievement can be broken.

Teenagers need short term goals so that they feel like they’re succeeding. If you can create lots of little successes then that kind of turns around what kind of life they’ve had where there’s been failure after failure and disappointment after disappointment. So having case plans monthly means that you can set goals that can be achieved in a month and then you’ve got something to be really excited about. Whereas within a year a teenager can... and it’s really normal and it’s really healthy and it’s part of their development that they’re focusing on themselves and not really thinking long term and that’s pretty normal and so we wanted to try to make it something that was achievable for them so that they start having some wins - staff member

Talking with clients revealed the strong sense of importance they place on the education component of the program in achieving their future successes and allowing them to develop aspirations. Their participation in education programs facilitated by the Education Officer at Young Parents Program helps many of them to complete high school and assists them with life skills, financial management and job placement. Some of the courses in which the young parents are engaged include Events Management, Aged Care, Business, Children’s Services and Year 10 and Year 11. They typically study through both TAFE and OTEN (distance learning).

During an education session, the Education Officer helped one young parent, who is studying a course in beauty therapy, with writing up her resume. At the same time, one of the volunteer tutors was sitting with a student while she did practice tests for her L’s driver’s license. The Education Officer commented that “even sometimes just sitting with the young parents while they work is helpful”. It’s this moral support that helps to build the confidence of the parents to undertake their studies when they haven’t previously had positive educational experiences or received family encouragement and support around education.

Where dysfunctional family situations, homelessness and housing instability have been important factors that impact negatively on the ability of these young women to achieve educational and employment success, the research highlights that the educational component of Young Parents Program has given the clients the opportunity in a safe environment to develop this area of their lives.

Re-engaging with education
While the young parents generally speak very highly of education, often their initial participation is one of reluctance. The research reveals that this is premised largely on a lack
of confidence as their previous experiences with education have often been very negative. The success which the parents have and the confidence that this success builds could be continually evidenced through the evaluation of this program.

*Also because it’s the system they’ve failed in before, you know that they feel disenfranchised from the education system. To…to re-engage as an adult; now they’re doing it for their child, as well as for themselves - staff member*

There were many examples of the negative associations that the young parents had previously had with education. One of the young parents used to come home and do her times tables and if she got any wrong her father would get angry with her. Consequently she was scared of Maths. The Education Officer speaks of the importance of providing an environment that is conducive to learning where the students feel safe and supported.

*What I am starting to understand for many of them is that the study group is the safe option and it is when they build up some confidence to go into the mainstream that’s when they traverse into TAFE and that is happening more and more - staff member*

In one interview a young mother tells of her initial reluctance to participate in education, and then subsequently, how well she has done.

*I am really happy that I’ve completed my Year 10 Certificate; Red Cross paid for my enrolment. It wasn’t really something I was planning on doing but I spoke to Gaby because I was, you know I hadn’t studied for nine years. I have worked, I have had a lot of work experience but I was quite nervous about it, I just didn’t feel very confident. I did the accelerated version and I got recognition of prior learning. That was through Randwick TAFE. It was because I got recognition of prior learning for my previous job experience and also just passed the test with flying colours basically - residential parent*

The young parent the quote is from went on to talk about how she would like to go to university and do dentistry or nursing. Prior to participating in Young Parents Program this young mother had no aspirations to study at university. She had been drug dependent and living from day-to-day in an unhealthy relationship. Since commencing Young Parents Program she has achieved education goals that have enabled her to aspire towards a tertiary education and career.
In conversations with the Education Officer, she talked about how holistic her role is, in that a lot of effort needs to be placed on organising an environment which is conducive to the young parents’ study and the development of career goals. She helps the young parents work out good practices in terms of packing their baby’s bags, sitting down and talking to them about their goals, providing them with the stationary they need, linking them into suitable education places and counselling them.

Education provides a really important pathway to employment. Many of the young parents participating in Young Parents Program are now engaged in vocational courses such as aged care, youth work, beauty therapy and events management. Research shows that employment can be a path out of poverty with obvious developmental benefits for children. Employment and training have been demonstrated to lead to improved parenting outcomes. Arguably, mothers who take up work are more engaged with their children and demonstrate more enthusiasm and consistency in successful parenting (Zubrick, Smith, Nicholson, Sanson, and Jackiewicz 2008).

**Recognition**

Each year the parents participate in a Recognition Ceremony to acknowledge their educational and other achievements. The parents play an integral role in the organisation of the ceremony and then run the event on the day. The ceremony in 2009 was attended by friends and relatives of the young parents, the CEO of Red Cross and the Executive Director Red Cross in NSW, staff and volunteers, representatives from services who are involved in Red Cross with the keynote delivered by the Honourable Minister Linda Burney. The Recognition Ceremony is an important process of recognition that plays a vital role in developing self esteem and empowerment. Recognition in the public sphere allows the young women to construct a positive sense of self and fits firmly within a strengths-based approach. Indeed, the processes of misrecognition (as observed by Honneth, 1996) are more common in service provision where the focus is usually on problems and deficiencies located within young parents. In this way, young parents are discursively positioned outside the boundaries of ‘normal’ parenthood, commonly being seen as victims or as threats to moral order.

When one staff member followed up with an Aftercare client to see how her young child was doing at his new school in a show of moral support, she complained about the other mothers staring at her and judging her.

She talked about how uncomfortable she felt and how everybody always looked at her in the playground and there were a lot of issues with Andy not going to school. We started talking about the playground and how she felt like everybody was judging her and people looking at her. I said “I look at you all the time because you’re beautiful! You’re so young and so beautiful I wish I was like
This brings into focus the young mother’s sense of stigmatisation and the need to build on the young parents’ self-esteem and positive sense of self. In doing so, we open possibilities for self-transformation and future development. In conversations with staff, they often expressed awareness that the disempowering effects of stigmatisation are more likely to be overcome through relationships of recognition.

Young Parents Program provides a protective space in which young parents are empowered through relationships based on recognition. The research findings identify relationships of recognition as key to empowerment. In particular, Young Parents Program creates scope for relational processes of recognition and affirmation that are fundamental to the young parent’s sense of wellbeing.

**Playgroup**

A lot of the staff wanted the play group to be really structured. They [the mothers] weren’t allowed to go and have cigarettes and I just said “look let’s go out to a community playgroup where the parents aren’t disadvantaged, where the children aren’t at-risk, and you’ll see exactly the same dynamic. You’ll see a bunch of mums sitting over there drinking coffee and eating cake and you’ll see a bunch of children over there all fighting for the same toy. Exactly the same as what we’ve got, you
can’t make it structured”. It’s better to acknowledge those incidental moments that you witness of good parenting and tell the client “oh that was really sweet how you spoke to him about…” you know, rather than grabbing your client and child by the wrists and dragging them off and instructing them to play. The play group needs to be more organic - staff member

Research demonstrates that supported playgroups lead to a number of positive outcomes for child development, parenting capacity and parent-child relationships (Centre for Community Child Health 2009). A recent evaluation in supported playgroups in Victoria highlighted that increased knowledge, skills and capacity to parent well directly results from attending supported playgroups because they provide an opportunity for parents to learn about different parenting styles (Centre for Community Child Health 2009). Children’s development in terms of their fine and gross motor skills and their behaviour were well documented too. Children learnt to share and take turns and relate better to adults as well as to their little peers.

Young Parents Program Playgroup is a supported playgroup. This means that it a space that provides opportunities for both parents and children to enhance their relationship in a supportive environment, increase their skills and confidence, and to develop valuable social and family support networks. The specific aim of the supported playgroup is to empower young parents to support their children’s development through participation in a variety of developmentally appropriate play experiences and activities. It runs every Tuesday for 90 minutes and provides an informal setting for parents to come together and socialise with other young parents. It is largely an unstructured environment to give the parents some relaxed time with one another and is also focused on teaching the young parents how to play with their children.

The parents’ sentiments about playgroup vary enormously. Some parents believe it is a good opportunity for their children to play with other children and for them to see other
parents. While a number of the Outreach clients don’t always show up to playgroup, when the researcher spoke to them about their experiences of playgroup, they were more positive than the Residential clients. This is because their children are generally older and playgroup provides the opportunity for them to bring their children to play with other children while they have the opportunity to socialise with other young parents. “I think in some ways you lose some of your friends when you’re pregnant, and then when you go to a mothers’ group the mothers are older, and it’s good to meet mums your own age” - Outreach Parent. However, this is not the case for those clients who are pregnant and those with newborns, who expressed views about it being an unnecessary and boring interruption to their days. This seemed particularly so for those Residential parents who are conscious that at the end of playgroup they must complete their big chores commenced prior to playgroup.

Throughout the period of the research, there were particular playgroups that the majority of parents enjoyed more than others. These were usually where the playgroup support workers or the Parentcraft worker engaged the young parents in particular activities. One of the successes was a playgroup session where the Parentcraft worker made plaster moulds of the hands and feet of the children of the young mothers. The young parents took photos and asked the researcher to take their photo with other parents with their own cameras. There were other very successful activities which the playgroup support workers provided which the young parents enjoyed. These activities, while not focused directly on helping the young parents to play with their babies, were still focused around making craft for their children and created good camaraderie among the young parents from both Residential and Outreach. When the support worker asked the young parents how playgroup could be improved, one suggested activities such as scrap-booking. As it was essentially the Residential parents with young babies who always attended playgroup, some of the Residential parents suggested that it would be good to have more activities focused around babies.

The playgroup provides a very positive space in which parents can interact with one another and the researcher observed many times the way in which the parents support one another and demonstrate warmth towards each other’s babies. The playgroup also provides a
relaxed and informal space where parents can ask for advice about their children or meet up with their case managers. The researcher observed many times where the young parents would use that time to ask staff for advice about their children.

C. Improving each of the Program Components
The following section sets out each of the components of Young Parents Program and suggested future directions in which each might be developed based on the research findings.

I. Parent Education
The program has a long history of working with young mothers and their babies rather than with families; with both parents. There has been a gradual shift in Young Parents Program to be more inclusive of men. With this shift comes the need to incorporate more sessions focused on fathering and on specific information for men in the Parent Education classes. This shift also signals the imperative to appoint a male worker to support the male clients and manage that position concurrently with the female support workers rather than as an alternative. The appointment of a male worker might mean always having a female worker on at the same time as the male worker so that they have very specific responsibilities.

We need to move beyond this female model, the feminist model. That’s the history of this place, originally men weren’t even allowed through the front gate, and I guess ultimately that’s the deficit model of men. We need to recognise the role of fathers and their desire to want to care and protect their family - staff member

II. Educational Resources
The educational component of the program is perceived by most participants to be vital. Improvement could be achieved through the purchase of testing materials to enable assessments to determine the young parents’ educational needs. Young Parents Program has gained additional funding to employ a teacher, in addition to the Education Officer and voluntary tutors and the findings reveal the added value to the education sessions. With the positive comments from so many of the clients about the education component, ongoing funding for the appointment of a teacher will continue to develop the education program.

With the Education Program I think the turning points are happening all the time in little bits. It is building layers of confidence that you can do it, because every small success builds on a previous one, and that builds resilience - staff member
III. Playgroup

While the purpose of the playgroup is to encourage the young parents to play with their children, the parents with newborns are more engaged with playgroup when they have activities to do which they enjoy. Playgroup is very important because it provides a very relaxed and informal space where parents can provide one another with support and ask for information about their babies in an informal way. It is often around these activities that incidental conversations about their children take place. Introducing more structured activities within playgroup emerged from the data as a desire. In the interviews, parents talked with much enthusiasm about the day they did the plaster moulds of their children’s hands. Examples of other structured activities that emerged from the research that could be included are scrapbooking, painting on leaves, and painting on stones.

If you don’t have education, if you don’t have parentcraft or supported playgroup – if you don’t have all that wrap around stuff then all you’re doing is case managing like other case management service and it’s not the same program it’s lost - staff member

IV. Availability of the program

Throughout the research over the course of the year it became clear through many conversations with the clients that the scope of the services provided by Young Parents Program was immensely valued. The program provides a hub where young parents can access information and support that might otherwise be difficult to source. The provision of one central place for support also allows young parents to build trust and relationships with the staff and volunteers. This has ongoing implications for young parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often experience social isolation, because it builds their social networks and links them into services as well as support and friendship networks.
How would you improve the program?

I would make it more available to people. Obviously you can’t fit any more people than are already in, but I don’t know, if there were no limits, no financial boundaries, I would just make more programs like this or more branches, there are so many people that like sort of envy me I guess having all this support in my life … it is great because I am doing stuff that I wouldn’t be able to do otherwise. So I guess that lots of people need something like this but don’t know that it exists. If I wasn’t in here studying, then I don’t know what I would be, I mean I want a career, and like, the education here is really helping me with that - outreach parent

V. Early Intervention - Social Inclusion for Children

When one of the researchers walked into the playgroup early in the evaluation, one of the young parents introduced the researcher to her “very beautiful daughter”. She told the researcher what the little girl’s Aboriginal name means in English – “it means sunshine”. Chatting to the researcher, she talked about her concerns about her little girl’s hearing as there is a history of hearing difficulties in her family.

An extremely important initiative that Young Parents Program staff members are working towards is a greater focus on adding to the quality of the children’s outcomes through using the time that the children are at Young Parents Program to diagnose and work with any developmental delays or other issues children have.

They’ve [the parents] got education on Monday and Thursday, they’ve got Parent Education on Friday, Playgroup on Tuesday. So the parents are very linked up and have driving lessons and whatever. While all this is going on they’ve got their kids out the back with volunteers, kids who have speech issues, learning delays, all those early attachment issues that we weren’t there early enough for … all that work still needs to be done and we’ve got them sitting there in the back room sometimes for six hours a week. So now we’re going ‘okay, what are we going to do with these kids’? Let’s get onto it because their social exclusion starts now, their pathway to juvenile justice, their pathway to unhealthy enmeshed relationships, it’s all happening right now while you and I are sitting here talking - staff member

In discussions with the program staff, a topic often arose around the developmental issues of children of the clients and the need to address these. It has become apparent throughout these lengthy discussions that there needs to be a future focus to appoint speech therapists,
occupational therapists and psychologists, among other specialists to assess and develop individual programs for the children of the clients.

Recommendations

Speech therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists, and other types of specialists when needed to assess and develop individual programs for the children while they are being cared for at Young Parents Program;

An increased focus on incorporating men into the program with more of the Parent Education classes focused specifically on fathering;

The purchase of Educational Assessment material to enable proper assessment to be carried out with regard to the young parents educational needs;

During playgroup, the young parents to be provided with the choice to carry out activities such as scrap booking, making play-doh, plaster casts of their children’s hands and feet and so forth. This is particularly important for engaging the parents with newborns.
7. Working with Men

In terms of how the program works with the young parents, I mean I am very pleased, and others are too, that they are now called Young Parents Program and I am quite keen to assist in that. I feel proud and privileged to actually be in here as a man, I feel old enough to be not quite a role model but just showing them that there are men in the world that care. When you consider a number of these girls who haven’t had good experiences with men... just simply to be there and be caring. In a way I would say I would like to see more men involved just for that reason. I know currently they are looking for another fitness instructor; they had a young bloke here for a while - volunteer

While the program has a history of being a program for women and the past focus was on working with mothers and their children, there has been a shift in recent years to be more inclusive of fathers. The program was previously called Young Women’s Health Program and has been renamed Young Parents Program. According to the Report of the Committee Reviewing Family and Parent Support Services for Men, fathers have distinctive needs and therefore respond well to mentoring from other fathers, to short term obligations, and to solution focused, flexible services (King 2005). This non-deficit approach towards family preservation, which provides young fathers with positive images of men parenting and access to male workers, is key to successful interventions with young fathers (Dias et al. 2009: 17). The non-deficit approach emphasises the importance of the relationship between fathers and their children (King 2005).

While there has been an increasing focus on being more inclusive of young men, young fathers’ access to fully participate in the program is constrained by a lack of appropriate physical space. Where appropriate, for men to be able to fully participate in the program they need to be included within the program at the same level as the young women. At present, men are unable to live at the Residence because the rooms that are available to the parents are only large enough to accommodate single parent families. This means that many of the men have to travel long distances to participate in the program and this creates a barrier to their full participation. Thus there is the need for a residential space that is also able to accommodate two parent families. Physical changes to the existing young parents’ residence are already in progress to at least try to create a space where families can have some ‘private time’ together.

It would be really interesting and really worthwhile if we could go down that path because we are getting more and more referrals for young women who have a partner involved and they need the intensive residential support but they want to be together as a family - staff member
When the young dads are here visiting their partners who are in Residence, there is not a good space for them to be where they can just hang out and have some private time. We have that area that is being built now and that is partly in response to that. It’s not ideal, it’s not very private, again that is something ultimately that would be great if we could have a Residential program that was able to house families - staff member

Many parenting and relationship programs are shifting from a deficit to non-deficit approach in working with men in families (Nixon 1999; O’Brien and Rich 2002; King 2005). The move in the direction of a non-deficit approach toward men stems from the recognition that many young mothers are often forced to ‘choose’ between their partners and their children. It has been acknowledged that through adopting a non-deficit approach towards men and building the skills and resources to work with more ‘at risk’ and challenging behaviours from both male and female parents, this would not only benefit men but decrease the incidence of young mothers being forced to choose between their partners and their children.

You have a young woman come here and she’s learning how to parent seven days a week and he’s allowed to come every day if he wants but he’s got to travel from the Blue Mountains and he’s unemployed and his family’s not supportive and it’s not going to work. So I would encourage partners to be able to come and live here. The young mum is more likely to give up her child if she has to choose between a young baby she’s just getting to know versus her whole family connection be it tenuous and dysfunctional. Maybe just two or three partner groups, like limiting it but still making it available. I think we need to move away from that male deficit - staff member

With Young Parents Program increasingly working with more fathers, there is an increasing need for dedicated male workers; male clients need male case managers. Experiences with young fathers thus far highlights that early intervention is also required with men who have challenging behaviour.

I guess by disengaging men, firstly we don’t meet their needs, secondly we’re complicit in breaking up a family, and we put him out in the community again, he’s going to meet someone new, he might get her pregnant, he might take that same family relationship system into that relationship, send her off to counselling and him back out into the community. I just think it’s crazy not to go ok you’re 18 and even if you are domestically violent, it’s ok we’re going to work with that so that we can, I mean it’s a problem for him as well. It’s not a good way for him to live his life and it’s not a good way for her to live her life. So I guess more acknowledgement that there is stuff you can do for men. It’s early intervention. A man who’s domestically violent at 17 has more chance of changing than when we get him at 50 when he’s going through family law court - staff member
The requirement for the ongoing presence of a female worker available due to some of the needs of the young female parents is also an imperative.

… sometimes we do have to support the young women with showering, sometimes we have to help them apply ointments, you know post birth and things so it’s quite intrusive and considering how many of the young women who are here have experienced quite significant sexual assault, we would need female workers here at all times. So I suppose the way to avoid that problem is that we could have a male worker part-time and they could work shift work but not overnight. So they would always be on with a female worker so if there is something that requires a female worker, they are always available - staff member

Recommendations

A residential space that can accommodate two parent families;

More intensive work with fathers that display ‘challenging behaviours’;

The employment of a part time male caseworker.
8. Cathy’s Story

Cathy was homeless and living in a refuge with her three year old son, Toby. She had gone to the refuge to get away from her partner who was violent. She was referred to Young Parents Program and managed to get a house. She started in the Outreach part of the program. Cathy was very aware that a number of people she knew were very jealous of the opportunities that Young Parents Program provided her with. She wished that there were more houses available so that Young Parents Program could help more people.

While she became annoyed at times by what she perceived as interference by case workers when she felt that she was very capable of parenting Toby, she was at other times very aware and appreciative of the incredible support that she was getting, particularly at times when she was finding Toby’s tantrums difficult to manage. It was also reassuring to be able to talk to staff and the parentcraft worker about his behaviour when she was concerned and be reassured that his behaviour was normal. She liked the informal way in which she could do this rather than having to go to a mainstream service. She wanted to have another child one day and believed that Young Parents Program had helped her to develop a number of skills.

She was grateful also that staff were aware of the services she could access in the community, particularly with regard to being able to get some free childcare so that she could study. She would not have been aware that these services were available if it wasn’t for the knowledge of the staff at Young Parents Program. Through the knowledge and guidance of the staff she was able to connect with a number of services that were very helpful.

As result of the volunteers at Young Parents Program taking care of Toby, Cathy was able to study personal fitness and attend work experience which she thought would be very helpful in aiding her to obtain a job later on. She wanted to get a good job and be able to provide Toby with a good education.

Cathy also loved the driving lessons that volunteers provided and she developed a close relationship with her driving instructor. Her driving instructor took her to a restaurant for a lunch a few weeks before Christmas. Cathy greatly enjoyed this as it was the first time she had ever eaten in a restaurant. She was appreciative of both the driving lessons and the relationship that she was able to develop with the driving instructor.

Cathy didn’t like having to come along to all the programs as she needed to catch two buses to get to the residence and this was quite exhausting. However, she was very aware of the benefit of the sessions and thought that if they weren’t compulsory she may not attend them and she knew that many had been very helpful in terms of both improving her
parenting skills and providing her with educational opportunities. While, Cathy didn’t enjoy all of the parenting sessions, particularly the one on newborns as Toby was already four, she loved the one on the brain development of a child. She felt that this actually made her closer to Toby as she was able to understand better why he was behaving in a particular way.

Throughout, staff helped her with budgeting. Previously, Cathy had never been able to budget and was reliant on welfare services to pay her bills. Since learning how to budget she had purchased a new fridge and had recently bought a computer to help with her studies at TAFE. She bought the computer through Young Parents Program and was paying them back in instalments.

Cathy loved going along to playgroup as she liked the company of the other parents. Before coming along to Young Parents Program, she had been quite lonely. Once Cathy became pregnant she lost many of her friendships because she could no longer participate in the same kinds of activities as her peers did. Young Parents Program provided her with a context in which to develop social relationships with peers who were in similar circumstances.
9. Stages of Program

The best things about the program in my opinion are the fact that we can work with the family, the mother and the child and the father over a longer period of time; there are quite recent changes in the history of the program. So the fact that the client can go through the Residential program for 12 months, then go into Outreach for two years and then come into Aftercare and be supported. And the reason I think that is one of the best areas is because it supports the parents with the changes with the child through their developmental changes. And we are now working with families whose children are in pre-school, starting school - staff member

The National Childhood Clearinghouse’s research paper entitled *Child Prevention: What works?* conducted a number of evaluations of parenting programs, and findings demonstrate that the more intense and prolonged a parenting program is, the more effective it will be in reducing the prevalence of childhood abuse (Holzer, Bromfield, and Richardson 2006).

Residential

*Residential in lots of ways provides that hub around which parents can access support and build bonds with one another - staff member*

The Residential component of the program is an integral part of Young Parents Program as it provides an important community hub for the young parents to access support and assistance. The Residential phase enables Red Cross to provide a space for the most marginalised and ‘at risk’ in society. It has been operating for 15 years and over that time has developed strong links to services in the area. It provides a different function from the other stages of the program and is an extremely important component in terms of working towards family preservation.

By creating a community hub in a therapeutic environment, Young Parents Program provides a central venue for activities for young parents as well as a place for mentoring between Aftercare, Outreach and Residential clients. This ensures all young people have a safe place they can come back to at any time to seek support. It also serves as a hub for other local services to link into, including health and medical services, education and housing.
There have been suggestions by the organisation to grow the Outreach but if you don’t have education and you don’t have parentcraft, if you don’t have all that wrap around stuff, then all you’re doing is case managing like any other case management service … and it’s not the same program then, it’s lost - staff member

We’re a real community hub; it’s a safe place for the girls to come - staff member

Working with the clients in Residential you are getting them when they first come in with their babies or they are getting restored so you are doing a lot of really basic parenting which is down to sterilising bottles, feeding every couple of hours. It’s fairly intense because they are here 24 hours a day. So you are surrounded by them all day every day - staff member

**Outreach**

Outreach has a case load capacity for 60 families and a large waiting list. Housing is a constant issue for Young Parents Program to meet the needs of clients as the program continues to grow. Young Parents Program hopes to increase its pool of medium term housing through community housing providers. More permanent housing options are also required to accommodate the growing number of clients transitioning to Outreach. In an attempt to address the housing challenges and to work in joined-up ways with government and other agencies, Young Parents Program is developing an agreement with NSW Housing and continues to foster partnerships with community housing providers. Reducing the reliance on public housing in the Outreach phase develops the young parent’s capacity to seek housing through the private market rental.

Young parents spend twenty five per cent of what they earn to rent community housing. The case managers try to visit these Outreach clients at least once a week initially and then less as time goes on. This decrease in visits is due to the length of time that parents are in Outreach and their increasing independence as their capacities build. One of the biggest challenges for the staff in Outreach is the number of clients with many staff having 8 or 9 clients, resulting in a large administrative work load.

While it can be advantageous at times to take young parents out of their communities where there have been dysfunctional relationships and it is beneficial to give them space to develop the skills to cope with those relationships (see next section), in many cases it is preferable to keep the young parents placed within their communities.
We need more localised housing especially for Indigenous parents. You know ... even taking a young Indigenous mum from Redfern and putting her in housing here in Randwick; it’s another world to her. You know ... if you’re talking about moving young Aboriginal women from their families in Mt Druitt or the Blue Mountains or Newcastle or the Central Coast, it’s breaking them away from their supports. It’s alright to say we’ve got the Aboriginal Medical Service and the Aboriginal Legal Service so you’ll be alright ... and this has been acknowledged, but there’s a lack of resources. I think we need other residential units in other areas. And maybe it’s about setting up a specific Indigenous residential area - staff member

**Aftercare**

As part of the transition into Aftercare, case managers focus on building young parents’ awareness of and confidence in accessing key services in their community. By linking clients into local services and engaging with other providers working in the community, clients are encouraged to develop and maintain a network of support, thereby reducing social isolation, building self efficacy and reducing reliance on welfare agencies. Aftercare is a voluntary component of the program and Aftercare workers have had a very positive response with 26 families presently being involved. Concerns from Aftercare workers and other staff are that parents are only able to access this service until the age of twenty-five. It is often at this age that their children begin school and the parents need assistance with helping their children to reach very important milestones at the very time that they are no longer able to access the program.

For me I guess one of the things that has come out of working in Aftercare for just over 12 months which is how long Aftercare has been running for, I think that exiting a family because the parent turns 25, in all cases, may not be appropriate. If we have a child that is below literacy and numeracy levels at school, if we have a child that needs extra support, tutoring, I would be strongly advocating that we continue a presence in that life. We have a family currently who has a seven year old child below literacy and numeracy levels. Due to the school he is attending he’s not having regular access to learning support or to counselling. So what we’re learning in Aftercare is that school, particularly public schools are hugely restricted in the resources that they are able to provide, so in cases where that happens I would advocate that we stay in that family’s life beyond the mother being 25 - staff member

While Young Parents Program is a parenting program focusing on family preservation and thus focused on parents whose children are in their care, there is also a concern over the support needed for parents who no longer have their children with them (parents who are parents but not ‘actively’ parenting). The importance of valuing these parents and
continuing to provide them with support raises interesting questions for the role that Young Parents Program might have here. What value is there in developing more holistic models that continue to work with young parents, who have had their child removed? Would such a model recognise that they are still, and always will be parents and continue to build their capacity to be a 'better' parent? The Aftercare phase of Young Parents Program is well placed to do this.

**Size of the program**
Recently there has been a focus on growing the program and growth has been occurring at a rapid rate. Due to a significant need among marginalised ‘at risk’ young parents, there is an acute need to expand the program. However, the research also reveals the significant concern by many staff about the importance of accompanying this growth with an adequate level of resources in order to maintain the high standard of the program.

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<th>Recommendations</th>
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<td>More residential units in localised areas;</td>
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<td>The establishment of an Indigenous residential unit;</td>
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<td>More localised housing around residential units to maintain community hubs;</td>
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<td>Increased access to community housing;</td>
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<td>Growth of the program to be accompanied by adequate resources;</td>
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<td>Aftercare to keep working with parents who are over 25 if their children have specific needs and there are no other appropriate services to support these needs;</td>
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<td>Aftercare to provide support for parents who are no longer ‘actively’ parenting.</td>
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10. Supports and Relationships

*I like the friendships that you make in the place - residential parent*

One of the common issues that affect ‘at risk’ young mothers is a lack of social support. Social support refers to those social relationships with both individuals and institutions that can provide emotional and practical support; it plays a vital role in parenting (Moran *et al.* 2004). Some groups in the community are less socially supported than others placing them at higher risk of child abuse or neglect (Garbarino and Sherman 1980; Ghate and Hazel 2002). Mothers who have social support demonstrate better coping skills in crises, such as impending homelessness, and are less likely to ridicule, bully or reject their children. The association with social support and health, particularly emotional and mental health, is well documented in longitudinal studies (Ghate and Hazel 2002). Being connected to the community and having friends is associated with reductions in psychological distress. The creation of communities that encourage participation and connections of all members of that community improves opportunities for young parents and their children (Zubrick *et al.* 2008). Maternal wellbeing is closely associated with feeling a sense of control over one’s life (Balaju *et al.* 2007). There is a strong correlation between supportive social networks and a parent’s ability to utilise adaptive parenting behaviours. Warm styles of parenting and positive parent/child interactions are more likely to occur when parents have supportive social networks. The networks allow parents to gain important information about their children, access important resources and provide supportive environments to help cope with crises (Balaju *et al.* 2007).
She came to this program with ten people that she could go to and each time when they’ve made her angry, she’s crossed them off the list and now she’s got no-one. We’ve told her she has to stop doing that. She has to learn to be angry and say they make me really angry, but not then go and bad mouth them to anybody that will listen, because she still loves them and she still wants them in her life and you know your network is so important - staff member

Me, Katie and Irene are really, really good friends now. Like, I didn’t come here expecting to make friends. I came here just for my baby. But I really did make really good friends with Katie and Irene. Like, they’re people I’ll probably talk to for the rest of my life - residential parent

Discussions with staff about the importance of building social networks as part of the capacity building of Young Parents Program highlight how different clients cope with cultivating their social networks in different ways, as the above quotes demonstrate. One Outreach parent actively sabotages all her social networks and is slowly building her networks through the support she gets from Young Parents Program, while another entered the program judging all the other residents, being nasty to them, and slowly learning from her case manager about being more open towards others thereby allowing her to make strong friendships. And yet another has made good friends during her time in Residential and naturally creates social inclusion for the new residents and between the Residential and Outreach parents at playgroup.

The Residential and Outreach phases of Young Parents Program provide young parents with social networks, support and access to opportunities in the hope of enabling them to achieve a sense of ownership over their own lives. The research reveals that Young Parents Program clients are not simply told how to make decisions about how to parent appropriately; something more subtle takes place based on relationships that embrace dialogue, the creation of social networks and the building of trust. Young Parents Program staff provide forms of recognition that may be otherwise lacking in the clients’ lives. Recognition (and therefore empowerment) is achieved inter-subjectively.

What is really great is that you see these young women, or families, but particularly young women who have been living here and this has been their home. When they are in a crisis we are the first phone call they make and even when they are unhappy with us they are able to stop and say ‘I know this is for the best and I know you are right really’. So there is heaps of actual insight, there is still frustration, but there is awareness and insight. Once you see that consistently that is really lovely. That is where really being a parent and knowing what you need to do and knowing what your responsibilities are and knowing what your priorities are and you kind of feel like they are going to be ok - staff member
When Josephine left the program and I had a conversation with her about the program and me being her case manager, was there anything she would have changed or would have like done better, and she said “no it couldn’t have been any better and it couldn’t have been any easier because we wouldn’t have participated”. She said if I hadn’t been firm, even though she didn’t like it, she knew I would get her through the program - staff member

**Existing Levels of Support**

The young parents have varying levels of support when they enter the program. The interviews revealed that many of them are determined to do things differently from their own parents; staff are keenly aware of this determination. Where those relationships have been difficult, staff focus on helping young parents to make those relationships more functional or at least provide the young parents with different ways of perceiving their families where appropriate. Staff teach the young parents about appropriate and positive relationships and how to set boundaries for managing difficult family relationships.

We talk a lot about sometimes you have people in your life who you have to set limits with and maybe you can’t be around them or you can be around them in certain ways. It doesn’t make them bad people, it doesn’t mean you don’t love them ... because in terms of identity, you hear the girls saying things like “all my family are fuck ups”, “I don’t want to be like them”, “I don’t want to live like them”. It’s helpful to want to break the cycle and have a different life but it is not helpful to think of yourself as coming from a family of losers. It’s really bad for your identity. We try and encourage them to think more in terms of ‘I want it to be different for me but maybe mum really did do the best she could in her situation and I have just had other supports and I have been able to make different choices’. So trying to keep it less blaming and less negatively labelling what they have come from while also being able to say it does need to be different - staff member

Look sometimes them coming away from their community (and therefore the negative influence) is helpful, but it’s not sustainable ... I suppose the goal is not to take people away but to give them space from it so they can develop the skills and then go back into their community and manage those relationships better - staff member

**Formalised/Informal Support**

I’m always going ‘You know you can’t take us with you; all you can do is take the skills that we give you. So you need to work really hard while you’re here to get these skills so you never need another service in your life again’. So we’re always like ‘work your way out of here, don’t be dependent on services, just rely on yourself; it’s such a foreign idea but it’s an empowering idea and it’s exciting and their getting skills and capacities and then their kids are going to learn from those skills and
capacities. And that’s really what you want; you don’t want to say ‘gee we taught them really well to knock on service doors’. I’d rather teach them to be capable and resilient because in the end they’re going to have a better life and their kids are going to have a better life and they’re going to feel better about themselves and feel like they can solve their own problems - staff member

I think definitely they are supported. They have that support twenty four hours, seven days a week. We are able to watch with them that their children are reaching their milestones - staff member

While the young parents are involved in the program they are given a significant amount of support that takes place within both the formal sessions and often more informally. Much of this support is focused around building the capacities of the young parents to parent independently and includes learning to budget, writing healthy menu plans, managing conflict in relationships, childcare while the young parents are involved in work experience, education and other programs. The comment from one outreach parent below illustrates the confidence and trust the clients place in Young Parents Program staff to support them in their decisions.

I am doing management and human services but I’m thinking about dropping the management, I’ll have to talk to Gaby about that first. She is just really good, she is really supportive and it is something that if you were sitting at home on your own and you are a young parent ... If you weren’t with this program you are not going to think, ‘Ok I am going to go to Centrelink, get some childcare, fill out a million forms, enrol in TAFE, pay this...’ you just wouldn’t. I mean you would have to try really hard to do it so you just wouldn’t - outreach parent

The young parents are encouraged to get their driver’s licences and they are provided with free driving lessons from two volunteer driving instructors who take the young parents out driving using fully insured Red Cross vehicle.

We encourage them all to get their driving licenses. They are given driving lessons for free. Adele the volunteer driving instructor is driving them to the Blue Mountains and back, having lunch, like an eight hour day of driving instructing! That’s the power of humanity because that relationship will sustain that young mum, that driving lesson means more than just that driving license. That’s a hundred and twenty hours of relationship building that will probably extend beyond that driving need - staff member

Young parents often lack the resources and networks to participate in outings, to go on holidays and to have respite from their children. Young Parents Program organises outings
for the parents, yearly camps and volunteers provide respite for the young parents so that they can have a break from their children but also importantly because these social opportunities provide avenues for the young parents to build appropriate networks with other young parents in similar circumstances. Theories of social capital emphasize the importance of strong bonding and bridging networks to enhance resilience in times of crisis (Putnam 1993, 1995).

Conversations with young parents highlighted that often they find accessing information from traditional parenting services a bit daunting. To address this, Young Parents Program provides parents with support and advice that is appropriate to their backgrounds and needs.

**I guess that’s been the history that we send these disadvantaged young women and their children off to these white middle class services and they just come back with distressed babies. Historically this service has had a very white middle class way of doing things when that doesn’t fit with our clients because they’re usually not white; they’re usually not middle class. I’m pushing to tailor things more to the individual needs and backgrounds. Just trying to be a little bit more empathetic to what’s going on and just being mindful that there is so much going on for them and these kinds of interventions might work for people who have a mother and a grandmother and a husband, you know big extended family networks, but these clients don’t have that and if they do they’re not allowed to access it because of … and so I don’t think we can get them to change that way. We need to tailor services to the backgrounds and needs of the clients … I’d reflect that I’m actually getting these young parents to do stuff that I can’t even achieve as a parent. And when I went away and thought about it, I realised that it’s just preposterous that I’m expecting someone to be a better parent than me when I’ve got all the support and structure around me in the world and training and education and they’ve got none of that - staff member**

An invaluable capacity building aspect of the program is the space that Young Parents Program provides for frequent access to informal support and parenting advice. A frequent observation made by the researchers is the ‘comfortable’ and informal way in which staff are able to provide the young parents with advice, support and reassurance with regard to their children. Talking to an Outreach parent during playgroup the researcher listened as she talked about how naughty her little boy is and he isn’t even in the “terrible two’s” yet! The parentcraft worker warmly reassured her that his behaviour was normal.

Baldwin’s (2007) research into the correlation between strong alliance and positive outcomes for clients highlights that the development of strong relationships between clients and staff is imperative for good client outcomes. Young parents frequently talk of the support they receive from their case managers, one explaining how her case manager showed her how to get her child to drink out of “sippy cups”. On one evening, the researcher noticed how a case manager showed support toward one young parent who had
just had a really difficult birth, by cooking dinner for her and bringing her painkillers. The warmth and support provided by staff is not only helpful immediately but role models in an ongoing way positive ways of interacting. Some of the parents talked about how their own behaviour had changed and become more positive towards others as a result of these exchanges.

When I’ve had arguments with the residents here in earlier days, I’d make really nasty comments and she’d [case manager] tell me that’s really inappropriate, and you can’t just talk about people like that, and judge them and stuff. And it’s true. I don’t do that so much now … yeah, like, she just kind of made me understand - residential parent
Mentors - driving instructors

The driving is a wonderful initiative. They can’t get their hours up any other way but it becomes much more than that because you are sitting in a car, two hours a week you tend to talk about lots of things – volunteer driving mentor

I have got on very very well with Marilyn; we have formed a real bond now that may be different with someone else. We have stopped occasionally and had McDonalds or whatever she wants to have, but when we went for a day, we drove to Mittagong, we stopped and had a bit of lunch which was sort of in a cafe/restaurant. We were only there for a short time because we were on a time frame to get back here but Marilyn was just bowled over going to a restaurant and I hadn’t realised that not everyone has that opportunity. She is really sweet because after that she said now I want to take you to lunch which was really touching because her money is precious. So she did, she took me to Oporto – volunteer driving mentor

An unexpected outcome from the driving lessons that volunteers provide for the young parents is the relationships that develop. In an interview with one of the driving volunteers she spoke about the bond that she has developed with one of the young parents, as indicated by the above quote. Prior to Christmas, a young Outreach parent arrived at Playgroup more ‘dressed up than usual’. The young parent asked the researcher if “she looked ok”. She anxiously told the researcher that her driving teacher was taking her out for a Christmas lunch. She was clearly very excited and said she had never been to a restaurant before. In addition to the support experience that the volunteers provide for the young parents, they often provide another important source of emotional support and friendship for the parents. Their volunteer role is enhanced further as another source (other than staff) who role model positive relationships.

Friendships and Learning from Peers

In a society frequently shaped by fragility and insecurity, friendship offers enduring bonds where young parents can depend on their friends to provide support and validation of their identities (O’Connor 1998, Pahl 2002). Programs that offer peer support combined with parental self development have positive effects on parents and their children (Pope et al. 2005). Teenage parents in particular can often feel anxious about their new role as a parent and have reported an enhanced sense of perspective from learning that other face similar situations, which in turn offers great relief (Moran et al. 2004). This research has revealed that one of the most significant outcomes of the program for the young parents is the friendships which they make with other parents and the support that they receive from their peers. One of the parents spoke about how much she has learnt from the other parents about parenting while she was pregnant and living in Residential. A staff member
arranged for a parent who is Spanish speaking to mentor another parent who is learning to speak Spanish as part of her education.

One of the Year 11 girls is doing Beginner Spanish and I said to her look one of the other girls in the program is a fluent Spanish speaker, what about if we hook you up, so I now have the Spanish speaker tutoring the other one. It’s real, that’s a breakthrough, you know if we can start getting those alliances going - staff member

Many young parents lose their peer groups once they become pregnant or their friends become unsuitable to be around. They often feel uncomfortable in conventional playgroups where they are a lot younger than the other parents. All the young parents spoke of the importance of the friendships that they had developed with other young parents their age as a result of participating in Young Parents Program. The residential space in the program was particularly important in creating a hub around which the parents support and build bonds with one another.

The support, meeting other mums definitely. Like before I got into the program I was really isolated and I didn’t know any other young mums and now I know heaps. It gets bitchy but it’s good because Tom always has friends to play with. Like we are all in the same situation - outreach parent

They form this nice little friendship group and a supportive group which is good. When a client transitions I don’t necessarily need to ring her to ask her how she is going, I just ask one of the clients as they keep in contact - staff member

Just the company I always have coming and I’m going to miss that when I move out. I will miss not having that day-to-day support and not having someone to speak to all the time. You know that you are not the only one going through a hard time - residential parent

Parramatta is particularly driven, they are a bit older. They are a small group and they have bonded and that motivates them - staff member

In a way I think I am the lucky one because my partner has stuck around, I totally respect all the others whose partners haven’t stuck around, going on with two kids, they have got support with friends, I think that is pretty good - outreach parent
**Relationship Building**

*I think the workers here are really important; we bond with them really well. Some of the workers, you get really really close to. It doesn’t feel like we are living in a house with a bunch of workers ... somebody that you can sit down and trust and talk to, and I don’t trust anybody that easily, not at first, I held out for a good two months* - residential parent

According to psychologist Carl Rogers, it is the helping therapeutic relationship of staff that forms the foundation for successful client outcomes. Rogers (1957) defines the genuineness of staff within the helping relationship. He argues that staff need to be authentic and demonstrate real feelings and real problems (1957). He says that conflict develops in the relationship when the staff exhibit a ‘better than’ attitude when working with clients and a helping relationship builds strong alliances and leads to better outcomes for the client.

While staff at Young Parents Program set clear limits and boundaries for the young parents, they are also aware of the importance of creating a warm and nurturing environment for the young parents and the influence which they have in providing good role modelling for healthy relationships. Within the program the young parents are taught the skills to deal with conflict. One example illustrates how the program staff worked closely with one client, who displayed ongoing maladaptive behaviour, to develop a positive relationship with her NSW Community Services case manager.

*For a long time she would not engage with her case manager, which was causing all sorts of problems in terms of caring for her daughter. I recall she came into Young Parents Program one afternoon and she had written a letter that she wanted to fax to her case manager. I remember what the first paragraph said, I don’t remember it word-for-word but she was like ‘Dear Alice, I’m writing this letter because I want to apologise for the way that I’ve been acting. I’ve got real problems with trust. I really find it hard to trust new people and I don’t like new relationships. These are the things that I’m finding hard...’ It was just so blunt and clear. She apologised, she still excused herself on a few levels but she named herself and she named what the barriers were for her to engage with her case manager. It demonstrated such insight! That was the start of a positive relationship* - staff member

A couple in the Outreach phase of the program talk about how their relationship with one another has improved due to the intervention of their Young Parents Program case manager and the Outreach team leader.
Probably when we argue, when we have an argument, we both have finally found a way to look at it differently. Say ok, Mike said this, I said this, I shouldn’t have said this and I don’t think he should have said this, how are we going to resolve it? We’re able to sort things out differently than a year ago when we were at each other’s throats. They [case manager and team leader] pulled us both aside separately and spoke to us about some issues that we were having and how we can deal with them and it has helped, you know the smallest things that we argue over but I have a short fuse and so does he, 9 times out of 10 we can sort it out by talking and making a joke about it or whatever, yeah we definitely learnt that - outreach parent

In addition to having an external counsellor the Residential parents also have a session each week with the residential program team leader and an external adolescent child psychologist who helps the young parents to resolve issues that they may be having with staff, other residents in the house or their case workers at NSW Community Services.

It’s their forum, it’s their agenda ... it’s only for the residents, staff aren’t present. Often it’s conflict between the clients and Hazel helps them to come to an agreement. So it can be things like using the washing machine and you know the dishwasher, the girls coming to an agreement on how they are going to live together. It is really hard having healthy relationships and managing conflict in a healthy way. We try really hard not to rescue them from their conflict by intervening. We make it really clear that bullying isn’t tolerated and that disrespectful, threatening behaviour isn’t going to be tolerated but conflict is a reality of life and so we try really hard to get them to work out how to effectively advocate for themselves and how to manage that conflict and communicate what they need ,that’s a lot of what happens in that group - staff member

The parents are provided with support that is both appropriate to their needs and backgrounds and that is facilitated in a way which develops their own capacities to be more independent. As they progress through the program they are not abandoned in the name of ‘self sufficiency’ but staff do focus on trying to withdraw support as it is less needed and to encourage the young parents to develop other networks and systems of support. One of the workers spoke about how often staff mind the babies of clients in the office downstairs; she regularly explains to the young parents that they need to plan respite rather than impulsively ask for a staff member to mind their child. The staff member points out that the parents won’t always be able to access immediate respite when they transition into Outreach or are no longer involved in the program whereas if they develop good practices now around planning respite that is something that can be replicated once they move out from Residential. However, all parents no matter how healthy and independent at times need support and the parents feel connected enough to the staff to call them when they are
in need. The research highlights that staff, volunteers and other parents provide very important social capital for the young parents.
11. Workplace Culture

Program culture
Young Parents Program has a very structured yet constantly evolving, flexible and dynamic culture. Staff subject themselves and the program to constant self-analysis through requesting frequent auditing, group and individual supervision from an external professional, taking into account the young parents’ criticisms and seeking additional evaluations of the program. The commitment which staff place on continually elevating the standards of the program was evident to the researchers and was highlighted in their openness to provide information and transparency for the evaluation to take place over the course of one year. The staff come from diverse backgrounds and there is a strong emphasis on ‘listening to each other’s ideas’ which has provided a real richness to the program.

I guess the structure’s grown with new people coming in. People come in and they bring their enthusiasm and their ideas and I think it’s really important to try and say yes a lot so that people get the opportunity to explore their ideas and turn them into something good. And so if you don’t even try then you don’t get anywhere. So we’ve tried different things over the three years and we’ve changed things all the time, you have to be flexible because you can’t run the program with a ‘no’ attitude because then you don’t learn anything; so all the learning is in the ‘yes’ and making mistakes - staff member

It changes like at a minute level nearly every week because the clients have a confidential meeting with a team leader and external facilitator and it’s like kind of group therapy where they are meant to say to each other, I don’t like it when you do this. They work out how to resolve issues. So as a result of that there will be talk with staff. Like for example the girls asked for more consistency with the staff. Each week you acknowledge what they say and try and incorporate that in ways of working - staff member

Strengths-Based Approach and Appreciative Inquiry
A strengths-based approach operates on the assumption that people have strengths and resources for their own empowerment (Maton et al. 2004, Brun and Rapp 2001, Lietz 2004, Pollard and Rosenberg 2002). At the heart of the strengths-based approach are social justice principles of power with respect and the ownership by the client of their own process of change. The recognition of resilience in the strength-based paradigm offers a different language to describe young parents’ difficulties and struggles.

Drawing on appreciative inquiry, strengths-based methodologies do not ignore problems. Instead they shift the frame of reference to define the issues. By focussing on what is working well, informed successful strategies support the adaptive growth of programs and individuals. Appreciative Inquiry, first articulated by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva
is about the search for the best in people, their organisations, and the relevant world around them. It involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It assumes that people have many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive rather than negation, criticism, and spiralling pathology. Young Parents Program shifts the focus from pathology and on the factors underlying problem behaviours toward a focus on protective factors and reduced risk. Protective factors include self esteem, trust, autonomy, self-reliance, ability to handle stress, positive coping skills, sociability and so forth. Through a strengths-based approach, the program emphasises people’s ability to be their own agents of change by creating conditions that enable them to direct the process of change. Young Parents Program creates conditions that enable young parents to identify and mobilise their strengths and capacities in their process of change.

When I came here I was surprised at... I don’t know if it was the attitude or culture, there was a kind of ‘do for’ culture, like a look after, like people couldn’t do things for themselves, and that really shocked me coming from a background working with disabilities; the young parents are so capable. I questioned why are we doing all this stuff, why are we driving them around, why are we giving them everything and why aren’t we holding them accountable to any kind of standard?. Um there wasn’t a lot going on in terms of, like there wasn’t any structure in the program. So the girls could just get up whenever they wanted, they’d still be walking around in their pyjamas at midday sometimes - staff member

Self determination is achieved partly through the sense of empowerment the young women accomplish throughout the program. We know that empowerment is a contested term (O’Cathain et al. 2005) and according to Fisher and Owen (2008: 2064), empowerment is typically defined according to a model of self-sufficiency that overlooks the role of inter-subjective recognition. Thus, they define recognition in terms of Honneth (1995, 2001, 2003) arguing that the inter-subjective processes of recognition can lead to a positive or a damaged sense of self. Honneth (1995: 173) tells us that “the only way in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves, from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as being with certain positive traits and abilities”. From this theoretical position then, we can discern that empowerment takes place once a positive sense of self has been constructed (Fisher 2008). Young mothers themselves gave examples that suggested that a sense of empowerment could come from a process of recognition, rather than a professional approach based on emphasising their perceived deficiency.

The culture within the program is one which is very focused on developing the young parents’ capacity for resilience and to cope independently. There is a focus on teaching the young parents the skills that will enable them to cope independently and by the time parents have come to the end of their two years of living in Outreach there is an expectation
that they will be living independently in the community. Rather than slowly withdrawing support from the parents, different types of support are provided as parents start to become more confident and empowered. They are encouraged and given support that can be planned more in advance as they progress through the program. Hence the support the young parents are given towards the end of the Outreach phase is a form of support that reflects the kind of support they would practically be able to achieve on their own. On occasions when parents are having difficulty transitioning initially from Residential to Outreach they may come back into Residential for a few days if they need more intensive support. Thus the program takes a strengths-based approach that is focused on providing a balance between developing the young parents’ independence while simultaneously providing them with nurture when necessary.

The challenge for Young Parents Program staff is to make their expertise available to the young parents without imposing priorities or solutions but to negotiate and joint problem solve. This requires working ‘with’, not ‘for’ or ‘on’; maintenance of a belief in the abilities and strengths of the client. It also requires the ability to sit comfortably with the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in flexible individual approaches for each client.

Key to the success of this strengths-based approach is the fostering of fine observation of the small but significant behaviours that might otherwise be overlooked, recognition of the good inherent in situations as they change over time and the success of achieving short term goals. The young parents can then cultivate a custom of celebration of successes, no matter how small.

**Accreditation Process**

A significant change initiated by the new manager when she took up her position at the program in 2006 was to gain accreditation for the program. The importance placed on constant self evaluation and analysis of the components of the program is reflected in the manager’s request to be audited frequently by the Office of the Children’s Guardian (OCG).

So we started the accreditation process and the process of really looking at the program. In terms of how things have changed, they’ve changed a lot. It’s still the same program in lots of ways but it’s a much more structured program, it’s accredited so our case management standards are much higher and in fact higher than the benchmark standards of the Office of the Children’s Guardian. They say case plans annually and reviewed biannually. We do case plans monthly in Residential and review monthly, in Outreach we do case plans bimonthly and review bimonthly; so we’re working to quite a high standard - staff member

The accreditation’s a massive change, like just the way it’s structured, the case planning structure, the reviewing structure, the amount of information we get structured our focus on health, education,
um it just has been such a glorious, wonderful process and the relationship with the OCG is fantastic
and we keep putting our hand up for as many audits as we’re always working towards a higher
standard of work and so I worry if we go to annual audits in a way I think you can miss things and
forget things we can possibly get, and they all think we’re crazy but for us being under the
microscope means that we’re always working towards a higher standard of work - staff member

Staff Support/Training/Staff Supervision
The interviews with staff members highlighted the diversity in ways of working at Young
Parents Program. This diversity comes from the different backgrounds that staff members
bring to the program. These differences often lead to productive frictions as staff debate
and contest ways of working, which leads to a dynamic workplace. The research indicates
staff typically feel well supported and listened to by management at the program level. All
staff interviewed talked about the support which they receive with regard to access to
training and supervision of their work. Although some staff complained about the
reductions in paid training because the training budget has been cut, they talked positively
about being encouraged by their manager to undertake further training, particularly the
free training that is provided by NSW Community Services.

Rogers (1957) states that it is important to seek out help from work colleagues and
appropriate supervision to develop awareness and insight. All staff at Young Parents
Program have access to individual and group supervision once a month by an external
psychologist. Interviews with staff members revealed the positive take up of this initiative.
Perceptions about the supervision are that it is highly valuable and that it feeds into the
dynamic nature of the program and the focus on constantly lifting the standards of the
program. The supervision is very important in focusing staff on the affective elements they
bring to their work and how to manage that in the workplace. Some staff believe due to the
stressful nature of their work that they would like access to more supervision.

The external supervision is really important so we do group supervision every month and then
individual supervision every month. I would personally like more supervision. It’s very intensive work
and I really value the supervisor’s contribution. I actually requested more supervision but there
wasn’t the budget for it - staff member

Making mistakes is part of your learning and trying not to make such big ones that are disastrous but
trying to foster a culture where learning from your mistakes is a good thing and I think that’s where
group supervision works so well. We brought group supervision in about a year and a half ago and
individual external supervision and that’s really helped change the culture and helped the
interpersonal skills in the team ... that’s really helped a lot. We’ve got a culture of looking at our
triggers. I think when you come to work here the biggest thing you learn is that you’ve got to
manage yourself and fifty other people - staff member
Rules, Consequences and Case Notes

As mentioned previously, staff try to maintain a balance between providing a nurturing environment while putting in place clear limits and boundaries. While they need to case note many of their observations and conversations with the young parents, they are also aware that this is the young parent ‘home’ and they strive to create that environment. Staff discussed the importance of using discretion when applying the rules.

The same goes with a client who is testing boundaries and you need to put in firm limits and a client who is refusing because they’re communicating ‘I have a need and my need is not being met’. How do you not tell the difference? A client who stays in bed and refuses to get up, are they saying I am not coping, I need this morning off or are they testing to see can I get out of groups? That’s about conversations and about judgment and you have an educated guess. Is it about a pattern and what is going to be achieved by insisting that the client goes to the group? If we send them to the group it is consistent but are we pushing that client to the limits; do they need a break? We have a go and sometimes we push in the right direction and things get better and sometimes we push in a direction and a client reacts strongly and really communicates that it is not the right thing so we kind of acknowledge that we handled it the wrong way and we acknowledge that they have finally said what they needed and we go ahead, so we are learning with the clients all the time - staff member

When the Residential clients do not follow rules or do chores they will receive ‘consequences’. There are mixed feelings among staff and the young parents about the value of this system. It highlights the complexities underpinning the compulsory nature of the program versus its capacity building objectives. In discussion with clients and staff, it is an issue that was raised numerous times. The advantages and issues in the use of consequences as a disciplinary measure was often a contested notion. What’s interesting about this issue is that it crystallises the significance of mutual obligation and respect between clients, staff and volunteers. It is clear that many Residents feel that the ‘consequences’ represent a punitive measure that is unnecessary when they are tending to their child’s needs before addressing chores. However, parents often approach staff to seek consequences for other parents whose behaviour has negative impacts for other parents and children in the Residence.

Well, just, like, if we leave food on the table, even a little thing, and our babies are screaming and we’ve got to attend to them, we get consequences. And it’s really hectic at dinnertime, and you just don’t remember to clean up after yourself sometimes. You can do it when your kid’s in bed, but they don’t seem to understand that! Yeah. And it’s like a big kitchen and there’s other people’s mess, and it’s just not as easy as they think it is. And they’d like you to come and let them know before you take your child up to bath them and stuff, but it just doesn’t work that way. When your baby’s screaming you just want to get them in the bath, get them to bed ... Well, they say it’s because it’s not fair to the other residents that you leave your mess around, or something like that, and you just have to let
them know, but other residents don’t really mind. They understand, because they have babies and they’re in your position, and they’ve done it before, as well. So … and most of the time the other residents are at the table and they can see your baby’s screaming, and they just understand! (laughs)

- residential parent

I don’t agree with the fact that if you leave a bit of food on the table you get a consequence, when your baby may be screaming, it can be hectic at dinner time, you don’t remember to clean up and it is irritating that you only allowed to wash one day a week-get a consequence for leaving clothes on the line - residential parent

Throughout the research, surveillance was an issue that was raised on numerous occasions by the Residential clients. A number of parents talked about feeling constantly watched and how what they perceive to be trivial issues constantly case noted. These conversations were typically critical and framed as an ongoing invasion in their lives. However, often details that the young parents might view as trivial are in fact important occurrences which are helpful in guiding staff in what strategies need to be put in place to help build parents’ capacities to parent more successfully. It became increasingly apparent that as case noting was of concern to the Residential clients that perhaps the value of case noting needs to be regularly emphasized to clients as a tool in developing improved practices for successful parenting.

A few of the young parents talked about how they couldn’t wait to get out of Residential because of the constant rules and invasion in their lives. In one playgroup session, a parent complained about how her son was pulling her hair. In jest, she said to him that she was going to pull his hair back. Smiling, she then turned to one of the staff members and said teasingly, “are you going to put that in my case notes?” and the other parents all laughed at her irony; the staff member smiled too. Staff are aware of the importance of making case notes but are also sensitive to how this feels for the young parents. Humour is an excellent coping skill and as this example highlights, the integration of humour in the relationship between staff and clients helps to establish a strong relationship in the therapy process. In this way clients learn that staff are down to earth people with a sense of humour too (Rogers 1957).

Well relationships and how conversations happen are relevant. For clients early on it would just seem really intrusive to have their words written down and it is really hard. Like imagine if you have a fight with your partner, having all that written down, even the words you said to each other written down, it would be mortifying to read what you say and because it’s a time of high emotion it’s like I am sure I didn’t say it that way but the staff try really hard to be objective and later on it is really helpful to be able to say ‘see how you used to communicate? See how you are communicating now?’ So it is intrusive, we try to be least intrusive but it is intrusive and we can’t pretend it is not. I don’t think
there is any way around that but it doesn’t mean that I don’t think there isn’t fine tuning we could always do better, there is lots of fine tuning. There are subtle nuances of how to do the work better and how to get the balance right. Staff members who have been around for a long time and know a client really well will know more of what is relevant than a staff member who is really new; a staff member who is new will be more likely to write everything or to leave out important stuff - staff member

Some clients, particularly those in Outreach, at times resent being told how to parent by their case manager when they feel they already know how to do particular things. Some expressed irritation at their case manager’s expectations when what they are doing is working fine. On the other hand, they all also express gratitude for the support that their case managers provide.

Sometimes Deidre dictates to us how things should be done. We are quite capable of doing things on our own. When she comes over she tells us how to do things and we kind of, we don’t want to say anything because we don’t want to hurt her feelings but, we kind of get a bit frustrated with it, we know she means well, she needs to kind of let us work it out, we might have a certain way of doing things that is easy for us but she might say this isn’t right, this is how you do it. If it works for us, I don’t see why we should change it - outreach parent

Managing Your Own and the Client’s Behaviour

When faced with challenging behaviour rather than reacting and you know when someone is in your face yelling at you and being threatening you have a reaction but because staff really reflect on their own reaction and take responsibility for it they are more able to respond to that client in a way that is helpful. So I really think we have improved our capacity to work with challenging behaviour. Our ability to work with more challenging behaviour means that we are able to work with more high need clients. The most high need aren’t always the most challenging but there are some very high need clients who exhibit very challenging behaviour - staff member

Through constant self-analysis and reflection the staff have better learnt to manage both the behaviour of their clients and their own ways of reacting to issues. As a result staff are now able to engage higher risk and challenging clients into the program. A process of critical self reflection and insight is encouraged at Young Parents Program that provides an ongoing learning process for the staff. Clients often display challenging or maladaptive behaviours when they enter the program. In these instances staff are trained not to react unless the behaviours are completely unacceptable in terms of the child’s wellbeing and safety. For
example, if a child is always hyper vigilant, unsafe and terrified then staff cannot continue working with that. The research highlights the increased capacity of the Residential phase of the program to engage with more ‘at risk’, marginalised and challenging clients.

But if I sat there thinking ‘oh my god she’s still swearing at me, I can’t believe it I can’t believe she’s still swearing at me, I can’t believe she’s so disrespectful’, where would I get? I’d want to kick her out of the program and how does that help her or her child? - staff member

Professional Boundaries

We talk about everything, well she talks about everything. I am selective in what I talk about. But I think it is important for me to give something of myself so that it is a relationship. She certainly knows about my girls and about my husband. She doesn’t know my address and my phone number. We only communicate through the program. So there is a distance but also a closeness – volunteer

I think the staff find a really good way of being able to be nurturing and supportive without crossing boundaries - staff member

An important issue highlighted often through conversations with staff and volunteers and through the observations of the researchers is the balance between creating a nurturing environment where the young parents can bond with staff and maintaining ‘professional boundaries’. These conversations also highlight the contested notion of being professional. While there are certain given which all staff and volunteers respect, such as not giving out personal contact details, most of the staff form very warm bonds with the young parents and these bonds are important for creating trust between the clients and the staff and for modelling healthy interactions. One of the staff members spoke about the dilemma between expressing warmth and maintaining boundaries stating that there are limits set around touching the clients, yet one of the clients gave her a hug one day and to not have warmly reciprocated would have been a rejection to that young parent.

And I think that probably a lot of these young women do seek that nurturing, it’s something that their lives have often lacked and also we know that as parents it is a very vulnerable time in your life – it’s a massive upheaval, it’s a massive change, a lot of the women who come to the residential unit have had to leave their partners because their partner’s aren’t allowed to live here so that’s a lot of change. And they come from backgrounds of disadvantage, where you know they might eat McDonald’s every day and then suddenly they’re thrust into a place where they have to buy healthy food, and you know all these changes are going on and they’re not able to just sit down and be in
that moment of crisis and work through it. So I think people worry about risk more than what I think we ought to. If you look at medical models in terms of nurses and early childhood nurses that profession is much more able to do that kind of nurturing and personal story sharing, that’s something you see a lot of in the medical profession but you don’t see it in the social sciences and I guess the program is on the border of both of those kinds of things - staff member

Appropriateness of staff

As noted earlier, staff employed at Young Parents Program come from a range of backgrounds and bring diverse experiences and knowledge to the program, which has created an extremely dynamic and rich environment. However, while Indigenous Australians are significantly over represented in out-of-home care and many of the clients at Young Parents Program identify as Aboriginal, there are no Indigenous workers at Young Parents Program. When Young Parents Program advertise they strongly encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants to apply but have difficulty in attracting Indigenous staff. Conversations with staff reveal that there have been Indigenous employees in the past and for various reasons they have not continued with Young Parents Program. These include acknowledgement of culturally appropriate ways of working by the Program and the larger organisation, working in isolation from other staff as there is often only one Indigenous staff employed if any, and dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander government positions available which are significantly higher paid.

We did have an Indigenous worker here for a while a few years ago but the service didn’t cope with them very well. There were probably challenges on both parts, that of the individual person and the program. She came in on the tail end of a very difficult case. So for that to be her first experience of the program was quite traumatic. She probably had a few boundary issues but very normal within the Indigenous community. You know... people share resources, you know take her out and buy her lunch with her own money, drive her home, pick her up on her way to work on Monday and that kind of stuff. Like that’s really normal but I guess we didn’t kind of acknowledge that. Hopefully another day we’ll try another Indigenous worker - staff member

While Young Parents Program initially began as a young women’s program there has been a very concerted move toward including men in the program and that prompts a need to employ male staff. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Section 7 of this report.
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<th>Recommendations</th>
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<td>Ongoing training of staff to ensure the careful and appropriate uses of consequences as a positive behaviour support tool;</td>
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<td>Case noting needs to be emphasised for its positive role as a tool in improved parenting;</td>
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<td>Appoint Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander staff;</td>
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<td>Salary rates need to be more competitive to attract appropriate staff;</td>
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<td>Appoint male staff in case manager and support worker roles.</td>
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12. Sarah’s Story
Sarah was an intelligent vibrant seventeen year old young woman who was under the care of the Minister. Up until entering the program, her entire life has been spent in and out of refuges and foster homes. As a result of her mother’s heavy use of drugs, Sarah had been placed under the care of the Minister and had intermittent contact with her mother. Sarah had some very good experiences in some of the foster homes and one of the highlights in one of those homes was being able to learn to dance which she was very talented at. She was upset that she was unable to continue her dancing when she moved into another foster home. Sarah entered Young Parents Program when she was pregnant as her foster parents wanted her to terminate her pregnancy and Sarah decided that she wanted to keep her baby. While Sarah’s life experiences had made her quite resilient, she always felt depressed when she had a change in her circumstances. When she first arrived at Young Parents Program she cried all night.

While she was depressed on her first night, Sarah adapted quite easily to the structure of the program as she was used to rules. While she didn’t like having consequences for not following the rules, she was very appreciative of all the help from the staff.

While at Young Parents Program, Sarah developed some very good bonds with the other young parents despite being given a very dirty look by one of them when she initially entered the program. As time went by, she came to understand the negativity she had initially received from other parents. It was hard for many of them when new clients arrived as it changed the dynamics of their living arrangements and it always took a while for everyone to adapt. Sarah was very skilled at making the best of a situation and good at advocating for herself in terms of getting what she needed and sometimes working her way around the rules. She however, not only advocated for herself but for others and seemed to naturally create a sense of inclusion for new clients and between Residential and Outreach clients. Sarah’s relationship with some of the other young parents at the program were of great significance to her as she has lost contact with a lot of her friends or had chosen not to keep contact with them due to their drug taking. She desperately wanted to show the world that she could be a safe and responsible mother and Young Parents Program provided her with the opportunity to do this.

Sarah also made good friends with people at TAFE. She was enrolled in her HSC with the help of Young Parents Program. She wanted to go to university one day and have a career helping people with disabilities. She believed that the educational opportunities that she received through Young Parents Program would enable her to do this.

A few weeks prior to the due date of her baby’s birth, Sarah became quite concerned that the father of her baby might try and get custody of the baby. She approached her
caseworker who suggested that she go and get advice from legal aid. Her caseworker made an appointment for her and suggested that Sarah catch the bus to the city as Young Parents Program were short staffed on the day and couldn’t spare any staff to take her. Sarah was disgruntled about having to catch the bus as she felt really exhausted and made jokes about the fact that she might end up giving birth on the bus.

Sarah had a very difficult birth and was very appreciative of the care of the staff when she returned to Young Parents Program. Case workers cooked meals for her and helped her extensively with her new baby, Ruby. A few months after the birth of Ruby, Sarah reconciled with Ruby’s father and he became involved in the program too. As the residence is not suitable for two parent families, Ruby’s father was unable to stay at the residence and travelled for three hours a day to come to the program.

Sarah was a doting mother.

When a house became available through a community housing scheme, Sarah was thrilled and she was transitioned to Outreach. The house became available over the Christmas holidays when all the compulsory programs that the Outreach clients need to attend cease. In some way, Sarah was pleased as it was quite difficult to travel back to Residential with a baby to attend the programs; however, this meant that she had less contact with the clients and staff than she would have had if it was during the time when the programs were running. While excited to move into her new house and be independent, Sarah also experienced an acute sense of isolation. She ended the relationship with Ruby’s dad a week after she moved into her house. Her foster parents were busy and unable to see her that often and Sarah missed Residential where she has always had company. She felt as though she had no one in the world who really cared about her. This isolation and these feelings were greatly reduced by constant visits by her caseworker who was very aware of the feelings of loneliness that many of the young parents experience when they initially transition to Outreach. During the first few months of her time in Outreach, Sarah came back and stayed at Residential for a few nights when she was feeling particularly lonely and this made her transition a lot easier. Sarah’s feelings of loneliness were also reduced by visits from friends who she had made while in the Residential phase of Young Parents Program. Slowly Sarah has adjusted to her new home and is attending Outreach.
13. Volunteering

And you see them dealing with, particularly here, where they often don’t get thanked from the clients, it can be stressful, the baby’s crying, the clients don’t turn up, there are a lot of frustrations, but you still see them ultimately making the best out of it - staff member

I think it was at one of the meetings where they talked about having mentors, sometimes, for the parents, but often it was a volunteer that the parent got attached to - staff member

What they get is love and care, I think better than at preschool. They may not be accredited as early childhood teachers but our ratios are significantly higher. And here they just pick them up and love and cuddle them. We have some very distressed children and I think what they get is lots of love and attention. It would be lovely to have the space for the older children to put in some programs - staff member

Young Parents Program currently has 75 volunteers from the local community who play an integral role in assisting staff to build the capacities of the young parents through providing a range of skills and supports. Recruitment and training of volunteers is overseen by a volunteer coordinator. Volunteers assist clients with childminding to provide respite for young parents whilst they study, attend appointments, and classes. Trained teachers provide tutoring in structured group study sessions and individual tutorials. There is a qualified baby masseuse who visits the Residence to offer instruction on baby massage. Other volunteers have provided yoga, personal fitness training, driving mentoring and swimming lessons for children and so forth (Dias et al. 2009).

Some volunteers are mentors for young parents in Residential and Outreach. Mentors provide another trusting relationship for the young parents and provide them a supportive
environment to reflect on successes, challenges and opportunities that they experience while in the program. Mentors aim to cultivate the interests of their mentees through weekend outings to places of interest to the mentees. This relationship provides another safe role model for the client beyond existing staff and family relationships. As mentioned in the earlier section on support and relationships, many of the clients form close bonds with the volunteers. Volunteers act as driving mentors to support clients attain their provisional driving license after the client has attended five professional driving lessons. Their role is to supervise the clients through the required 120 driving hours in an insured Red Cross vehicle. The dynamic interactions that are talked about by both the volunteers and the clients highlight the sense of connectedness that mentor volunteers cultivate with the young parents.

Once volunteers have been interviewed and have had their background, police, working with children and reference checks, usually a process of around three weeks, they then do a trial at Young Parents Program where they are supervised by the volunteer coordinator or an experienced volunteer. When they formally start at the program, they go through a two hour induction session where they are informed about the background of the program which includes such information as maintaining professional boundaries. They then have three to six supervised skills sessions, which is where they actually do the work with the volunteers and volunteer coordinator. Volunteers also do a one-day child protection training course.

Volunteers are mostly female (there are several male volunteers) and come from diverse backgrounds including young students through to retirees. In total, volunteers spend an average of 300 hours each month at the Residence, which indicates the important role they have in the running of the program. Notably, the volunteer base continues to grow with the attrition rate at approximately only ten percent.

While the care that the young children experience from volunteers is of high standard with higher staff to children ratios than at most pre-schools, some volunteers indicated they would like to have the space and resources to implement an education program to enrich the childcare that they already do.

The work of Red Cross but in particular Young Parents Program, is what emerged as a common theme for why people volunteer with Young Parents Program; they believe in the work that the program does and that the program advocates for family preservation for young parents from disadvantaged backgrounds. For many, the work is a something they want to be involved in. Volunteers talked about their experiences of how the program, and importantly their role in it, effects change in the young parents’ educations levels, ability to study, and confidence. This signals how the volunteer experience gives volunteers the ability to act as agents of change in the lives of the young parents. The findings indicate the
mutually beneficial nature of volunteering. For example, while volunteers get something out of their volunteer experiences for themselves, they also firmly feel that the young parents benefit from their involvement as a volunteer. Volunteers also talked about the increase in volunteers at the program and how that has built the capacity of the program, particularly the education component. Other comments referred to the work of the volunteer coordinator and how they felt respected and valued, “really included in the decision making processes, it’s like I’m working in a partnership with Virginia” - volunteer. The research highlights that volunteers bring a diversity of experiences and perspectives to their volunteer role. The positive role modelling and sharing of values by many volunteers, particularly female volunteers, for the young parents to experience regularly, provides a great resource to the program.

There are plans to expand the volunteer program to provide ongoing support for school-aged children of clients. Aftercare staff have reported the need for ongoing mentoring and support as young parents often find it difficult to navigate the education system and how to be supportive of homework and assignments because of their own negative experiences of education. Providing home tutoring and mentoring will assist the parents in supporting their young children to engage more successfully in education for the long term.

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<td>Extend the volunteer program to include the provision of ongoing support for parents with school aged children such as tutoring.</td>
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14. Relationship between Services

We want to work all together, we want NSW Community Services to do well in their case planning and we want to do well in our case planning. So we’re all invested in everybody doing well; it’s a collective effort to the benefit of the client - staff member

A Shared Approach to Child Wellbeing - Collaboration between Services
The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) commissioned the report *Inverting the Pyramid*, which is premised on the public health prevention model and the development of a conceptual model to move the system from tertiary dominated interventions to a more prevention focused model. The report highlights the need for shared responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people rather than risk aversion.

Young Parents Program draws on government partnerships and positive interagency relationships to support the development of long term solutions for young parents and their children. Red Cross has links with local general practitioners, allied health professionals, local dental practitioners, counsellors and speech therapists as needed. All clients receive health assessments within the first two months of entry into the program and they receive regular medical appointments. Young Parents Program has an excellent relationship with the Department of Human and Community Services and the Education Officer has developed very strong and supportive connections with a number of Educational Institutions, particularly TAFE’s in the area and OTEN to assist with the young parents educational achievements. In addition, Tot Spot takes place in the program which is a session that provides young parents with parental advice and is facilitated by an external nurse educator.

The relationship with the case workers at NSW Community Services, we really work hard to build the relationships and, with the clients, having hard conversations and being able to learn together with them on how to make things happen and I guess just getting more competent at managing our relationships with the case workers at NSW Community Services and having a really positive attitude towards the Department and realising that just like us they’re individuals that are trying really hard ... I think that there’s a difference because, if you think about it, a NSW Community Services case worker’s client load and what they can do, if you look at the Wood Report, there’s not much case management being done because they’re in court all the time and so it’s really important that our relationship means that we strengthen their capacity to communicate with the clients in more
Positive ways because we have the time to understand the client and develop the relationship with the client. We share that knowledge with the NSW Community Services case worker; break down those barriers a little bit - staff member

Knowledge of and access to existing services and building parents’ capacities to access services

A number of parents talked about how knowledgeable the staff are about the support that is available and how invaluable this knowledge has been to them in helping them to develop their capacities to access services that allow them to focus on building their skills, training or education.

One of my strategies is to connect as much as possible with the TAFE staff. TAFE has been unbelievable in the past in terms of support and flexibility. I think that they offer flexibility and they acknowledge that this is a needy client group. And OTEN, OTEN are great - staff member

Yeah, I had no idea that I could get subsidised childcare until I came here and there was actually like a childcare payment that comes with childcare if you are studying and I wouldn’t have known that. It is not publicised at all, so, yeah it’s just it’s really cool - outreach parent

Staff talked about the importance of keeping abreast of what services and supports are available to young parents. This is particularly so in creating an awareness of the supports available to parents with school-aged children as Young Parents Program develops its capacities to work with clients with school-aged children. In addition, staff talked about the importance of providing parents with the skills to advocate for themselves and their children.

They definitely are, like, I will go back to the example of the family with the 7 year old, over the past 12 months, our services worked really hard in helping the mother communicate with the school and that is an area that we, we kind of always knew but I guess this brought it out that our parents have not had good educational experiences so when they go into a school with their child they are actually quite fearful, it triggers so many reactions for them. Where mainstream parents would quite easily contact the teacher and meet with the teacher and meet with the principal that is a huge thing for our parents. So looking at supporting this mother in building her confidence to organise meetings with the school was a big achievement for her. Sitting down and saying this is what I need for my son and really advocating, she has started to do that now. So that is an area of work that I really think we need to develop. We don’t want to go in there and disempower them but actually empower them with ways to communicate with the school and to not take their own negative response from schooling as the final word - staff member
We can ensure that we are really skilled workers and we know exactly what is out there so that the client can access mainstream services. Because we are working with clients longer now, we are seeing clients with children four to eight or ten, we haven’t always been so aware of what schools should be providing and what they can be providing, what Medicare can provide, so it is having really good knowledge around that and if that is not available then having the funding to be able to do it - staff member

Culturally appropriate service

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Young Person Placement Principles are closely observed by Young Parents Program in an effort to ensure best practice with Aboriginal clients and their children. With family preservation at the heart of the work of Young Parents Program, the value of the extended family, kinship arrangements, culture and community in raising children are recognised as imperatives. Thus the improvement of family relationships and the development of culturally appropriate support networks is a key element of the work undertaken by Young Parents Program case managers. In achieving these aims, Young Parents Program seeks support from Aboriginal services that sometimes provide co-case management. These collaborations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations involve reciprocity through the sharing of knowledge, advice with program development, and enhancement of work practices with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Dias et al. 2009: 17).

Recognition that Young Parents Program must strive towards ongoing improvements in working with Aboriginal parents, families, and communities is the best way to ensure positive outcomes for Aboriginal infants. This requires increasing flexibility in its service delivery to ensure culturally appropriate services to meet the needs of young Indigenous families.

In recent years, Red Cross has developed strategies to engage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Given the high proportion of Indigenous clients to Young Parents Program, it is imperative that Indigenous staff members are appointed to respond in culturally sensitive ways to the strengths, challenges and barriers of the Indigenous client base. Appointing one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff member will not adequately respond to this imperative. Making multiple positions available provides a culturally supportive workplace for Indigenous staff joining Young Parents Program. It may also be necessary to offer job share positions for Indigenous staff as another means of providing a supportive workplace environment to Indigenous staff.
Recommendations

To be flexible in its service delivery to better meet the needs of young Indigenous clients AND to more effectively include Indigenous families and communities;

To develop collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations;

Develop greater knowledge about access to services for parents with school age children.
The nature of the work being achieved at Young Parents Program meshes intimately with the priority areas for Red Cross work and its new directions for ways of working.

- **Addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Disadvantage** – “we will build genuine partnerships and work in urban and remote areas through these partnerships to improve the life choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities”.

Aboriginal people are considerably over represented in out-of-home care (DoCS 2007a; McHigh and Valentine 2010). Increasingly there are more clients entering Young Parents Program (both Residential and Outreach) who identify as Aboriginal. In its work with Aboriginal young families, Young Parents Program follows guidelines that adhere to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Young Person Placement Principles. In working with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families developing culturally appropriate support networks for raising children is vital. Young Parents Program thus works with kinship arrangements through extended family, culture and community.

With the increase in clients who identify as Aboriginal in Young Parents Program, there is an ongoing need to improve the quality of Young Parents Program’s work with Aboriginal parents, families, and communities to ensure the best possible outcomes for Aboriginal children. The research reveals that Young Parents Program needs to be increasingly flexible in its service delivery to better meet the needs of young Indigenous families and more effectively include families and communities. Red Cross has developed strategies to assist the organisation to engage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. The program is also working to develop meaningful and collaborative working relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations by sharing knowledge and resources, inviting feedback and assistance with program development, enhancing relationships and improving practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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**We have challenges managing Indigenous clients here mostly because we don’t have Indigenous staff. We need to provide culturally appropriate solutions. The question here is how can Young Parents Program better provide existing or new services to Indigenous clients? - staff member**

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- **Overcoming social exclusion by providing bridges back into community** – “we will work with particular groups of people on the margins, (such as ex-prisoners, people with mental illness and homeless people) to help them overcome social isolation. We will apply
innovative thinking and the strength of our urban and regional networks to reconnect growing numbers of marginalised people back into their communities”.

It is important to note that the risks of isolation is compounded for those who fit multiple categories: women and children, particularly single mothers; mothers with young children; homeless people; young people; those with drug and alcohol dependency; women experiencing family violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Baldwin 2006). The clients of Young Parents Program largely fit these criteria. Young mothers with children have emerged in much literature as a prime focus for early intervention and prevention strategies and requiring focused inclusion strategies.

The needs of young parents, not only in moments of crisis but also identifying and addressing underlying and evolving issues, are addressed through a flexible longitudinal model of service provision. For example, to begin with parents usually need a range of services, but over the years as their capacity develops to live independently and parent successfully, they require less support. Through a staged process that builds resilience and addresses vulnerabilities, young families are supported back into the community as fully integrated parents of the community.

The development of strong social networks through participation in Young Parents Program is key to long term positive social outcomes for family preservation. We know that positive family relationships protect children and young people against the adverse effects of marginalisation and disadvantage (AIHW 2009). Young Parents Program supports young parents to re-establish relationships with appropriate family and friends and to build their social networks through participation in mainstream community activities (Dias et al. 2009).

- **Building on strengths** – “recognising the inherent strengths of all people we will deliver training and develop skills to build on these. We help people to take control of their own lives and environments by building on their existing strengths”.

Young Parents Program builds on the client’s strengths emphasising their ability to be their own agent of change, focussing on building capacity and resilience. Clients are involved in the development of case plans and goals, case conferences and reviews with a focus around the strengths and abilities of the clients. Clients regularly read and include their own notes as a way of having a voice in the process. In this way, case meetings provide important opportunities for the clients to exercise self determination. This is also achieved partly through the sense of empowerment the young women accomplish throughout the program.

- **Prevention through early intervention** – “we will focus on early engagement to break the cycle of disadvantage, while continuing to support and respond to crises where necessary”.

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Young Parents Program aims to break the cycle of disadvantage through prevention, early intervention and family preservation (Dias et al. 2009). This research demonstrates that Young Parents Program offers an innovative capacity building model for local service provision for early intervention and parenting services (residential, outreach and aftercare) that are responsive to the needs of young marginalised parents. As the only accredited service of its kind in New South Wales, Young Parents Program in the Australian context is a particularly unique holistic early intervention approach.

- **Working in Partnership** – “we will work with community groups, business, governments and other not-for-profit organisations to identify and respond to needs in communities. To provide the best outcome we will facilitate instead of delivering services where our partners can do it better”.

Young Parents Program draws on government partnerships and positive interagency relationships to support the development of long term solutions for young parents and their children. Red Cross has links with local general practitioners, allied health professionals, local dental practitioners, counsellors and speech therapists as needed. All clients receive health assessments within the first two months of entry into the program and they receive regular medical appointments. Young Parents Program recognises the need to mobilise and enhance multiple supports in a collaborative manner in order to foster resilience and, as this research demonstrates, it is in these ways that Young Parents Program works.

- **Avoiding Duplication** – “we will attempt to provide services where we can deliver the best outcome. We work closely in partnership with other agencies working towards the same goal to maximise the benefits for disadvantaged individuals and groups”.

Young Parents Program works in partnership with services that provide general and specialised support in an effort to avoid duplication of services. Referral to services is based on the goals that the young parents and their case manager work together to identify and this informs which services to refer a client to. Additionally Young Parents Program invites services to present information at the Residence.

Partner support services that Young Parents Program works in partnership with to avoid duplication include: NSW Community Services, Centrelink, NSW Housing, Bridge Housing Association, Churches Community Housing, Compass Housing Services, Affordable Community Housing, Pacific Link Community Housing Association, Bondi Youth Accommodation Service, WAYS Youth Services, Oasis Youth Support Network, Deli Women’s and Children’s Centre, The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre, Botany Family and Children’s Services, Gosford Family Support Service, Burnside, Catholic Care, Sydney Day Nursery (SDN), Sydney Children’s Hospital Adolescent Unit, Malabar Midwives, Chemical Use in
Pregnancy Service (CUPS), Child Protection Therapy Team, local police, Joint Investigation Response Teams, Karitane, Early Childhood Centres, Aboriginal Medical Service, local medical practitioners, consultant psychologists, Maroubra Swim School, Mobile Minders, BUMPS/Young Love, NSW TAFE, Open Training and Education Network (OTEN), Distance Education High School, Bondi Beach Cottage.

There’s so many more services working in an integrated way and supporting each other for the best outcomes for mother and child and that’s really hard work and it doesn’t always go smoothly but it doesn’t mean that that statistic of that child being in care means that that child’s only seeing their family one to four times a year, which is fairly common for children in care. What I’ve seen in the last three or four years is that these children are getting placed with family because together with NSW Community Services we find out who is in the family, we have case conferences to figure out how we can reconnect these kids to their families so that maybe in a few years time the parent is going to be far more reconnected to her kid with a whole lot of family support that she wasn’t getting initially - staff member

- **Acting on evidence** – “We will ensure our work is based on solid evidence by building our own research capability and by drawing on a wealth of experience, locally and internationally to produce work which is well planned, measured and evaluated”.

An important aspect of the culture of Young Parents Program is an emphasis on staying up to date with new research and making sure that the program is constantly accommodating and being informed by this research. Indeed the process of entering into a collaborative research partnership with the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion is one example of this.

- **Mobilising volunteers** – “the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are renowned for mobilising volunteers – especially in times of disaster. We know that volunteering helps create cohesive and resilient communities. We will work to increase the level of volunteering in disadvantaged communities to both help strengthen them and to deliver services”.

Young Parents Program currently has a growing program of 75 volunteers from the local community. They assist clients with childminding to provide respite for young parents whilst they undertake study, classes or attend appointments. Trained teachers provide tutoring in structured group study sessions and individual tutorials. Some volunteers act as mentors for individual clients. Others provide specific services such as exercise classes or parent education workshops around specific issues.

The volunteer coordinator provides time and space for building relationships with and between the volunteers. In this way the program strengthens participation and a sense of
connection. The interaction is an important part of the volunteer experience. Interaction between volunteers, program staff, and young parents and their children, develops valuable networks which strengthens the program’s ability to create resilience and social inclusion of the young parents.
16. Concluding Discussion

Turning Points and Aspirations

I’ve been in lots of refuges and youth housing programs. This program is really, really good, especially the education. I wouldn’t be doing any of this if I wasn’t in the program, and – yeah, I really like it. I feel like I’ve sort of gotten a purpose, and they’re so supportive. I now want a career in something. And the education here is really helping me with that - outreach parent

The title of this report Turning Points is a metaphor that alludes to those moments where parents experience an awareness of the development in their capacity directly resulting from their participation in Young Parents Program. Most of the parents in the program come from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds. Bottrell (2007) tells us that at the level of individual experience, young marginalised people often accrue labels of failure attributed to their individual deficiencies, which pathologises them in terms of their deficiencies. At-risk categories are often couched in the same deficit terms. Thus young pregnant and parenting teenagers are often understood in relation to constructions of youth ‘at risk’ (Bottrell 2007; Cohen and Ainley 2000; Griffin 2004; Kelly 2006). In this way, marginalised young parents are reinscribed within patterns of relative failure (Te Riele 2006). When young people live in conditions of adversity and disadvantage they are likely to be identified within ‘at risk’ discourses (Bernard 1997; Te Riele 2006). Young Parents Program represents a departure from this emphasis on pathologies and problem behaviours, and refocuses attention on the resilience and capacities of young parents.

A qualitative methodological framework allowed the researchers to evaluate the efficacy of Young Parents Program in terms of its ability to build the capacities of young ‘at risk’ parents from the experiential and subjective perspectives of the parents, staff and volunteers. This framework allowed for the development of a very rich picture of the program and its impact on the lives of these young parents. The parents’ discussion of their experiences documents the way in which the program has aided in the development of their capacities and aspirations for the future and their growing confidence.

The research has revealed that through a strengths-based approach Young Parents Program seeks to understand the crucial variables contributing to individual resilience and well functioning families. This approach provides a common language and prevention philosophy that is youth driven and relationship focused. In these ways, Young Parents Program engages often distressed young parents with respect and affirms the reparative potential in young parents by enhancing strengths as opposed to deficits. Nurturing engagement in
meaningful relationships and in meaningful activities are essential factors for positive change. Young Parents Program strives to accomplish this by exploring and mutually agreeing on goals the young parents are truly invested in; exploring and agreeing on ways to reach those goals; to see the ability to make positive change; to see intervention as a collaborative process and to regularly ask for feedback and adapt.

The research highlights the reflexive nature of the program and the ongoing process of self analysis undertaken by the staff. This process then, combined with the regular audits by the Office of the Children’s Guardian, ensures that the program is responsive, dynamic and continuously evolving.

This research suggests the importance of social support (both formalised and informal) in successful parenting. The literature tells us that the development of supportive networks is associated with lower stress, increased personal wellbeing, and greater personal self efficacy for young mothers. Mothers who have supportive social networks available to them have also been shown to be better equipped with resources that buffer stressful events. There is a clear relationship between supportive social networks and a parent’s ability to use adaptive parenting behaviours. Nurturing styles of parenting, positive mother-child interactions, and a parent’s ability to provide stimulating environments are more likely to be present when parents (mothers in particular) also have supportive social networks. Balaji et al. (2007: 1392) argue that a supportive network benefits mothers in three distinct ways: first, mothers are able to acquire information on developmentally appropriate methods of parenting; second, support networks offer tangible resources in the form of childcare and financial assistance; third, networks can serve as buffers against maladaptive parenting and stressful life situations. These modes of assistance translate into parenting environments that contribute to positive outcomes for children and improved wellbeing for mothers.

The importance of the role of education in developing capacity and aspiration is a main theme to emerge from this research. For marginalised young people, school is problematic in a series of ways that are not only educational, but also relational and social. Where many of the parents in Young Parents Program have had negative experiences within the education system, the idea of re-entering education was not considered prior to their participation in Young Parents Program, with many perceiving it as too big a challenge. For these young parents, the need to self-protect against expected failure has typically meant a retreat from aspiration. Desiring conventional success is tempered by wariness of expecting too much. The program enables young parents to develop aspirations. Appadurai (2004) refers to aspiration as the positive development of cultural capacity because it denotes a cultural relationship to the future. The research highlights that making education something which is attractive to the parents in Young Parents Program enables them to aspire and develop their capacity.
Just the study, it is really my way out of being broke. I want to get a great job and I just want to keep studying for as long as I can. I don’t think I can go without a job for long enough to do uni but I know I can study part time while I work - outreach parent

This research suggests that Young Parents Program demonstrates a contribution to building the capacity of individuals for self realisation. In this sense, individual capacity is not only concerned with changing the material wealth of the individual, or with enhancing their particular skills or moving them nearer to the labour market of the formal economy. Capacity building is also a question of changing the individual’s perception of her own life and its possibilities. Even for those parents who did not successfully complete Young Parents Program, their involvement in the program elicited some positive outcomes for each client as it focused on individual strengths and capacity building. For example, while the program gave them the opportunity to have their child restored to their care to learn about healthy positive parenting, it also gave them the opportunity to re-enter education or vocational training with intensive support from the Education Officer and volunteer tutors. These are all skills the young parents take with them.

The researchers observed and heard about many ‘turning points’ for the parents that resulted directly from their engagement with the program. Young Parents Program is evidently successful in creating aspirations, confidence and building the skills of these parents. A significant turning point for many of the clients came in the form of learning how to balance study with parenting. One of the most fundamental changes for young parents participating in the program is in their aspiration for their future.

Well, I’m really happy that you know I completed my Year 10 certificate. It wasn’t really something I was planning on doing, ‘cos I was just...you know, I hadn’t studied for nine years. I was just quite nervous about it. And I guess I just didn’t feel very confident. And um...I was really proud of myself, because I completed it in one month. I did the accelerated version through Randwick TAFE and I got recognition of higher learning for previous topics. I just yeah, passed the test with flying colours, basically. I couldn’t believe it, yeah, I was really shocked. And my teacher kept saying to me, “Oh, you should really go to university, you know”...So yeah. I was thinking maybe dentistry but dentistry is like a six year degree and it’s quite ... I grew up quite poor and I want Isabelle, I want to be able to you know, be financially stable enough where I can afford to pay for extra curricula activities for Isabelle that I never got to do, like little nippers and sports and stuff -residential parent

All the parents who were asked about how they would like their lives to be in ten years talked about how they would like to be good parents, that they wanted to be financially
secure and to get an education. They all believed that being engaged with Young Parents Program would be a contributing factor in helping them to achieve these dreams.

I just want a home and a stable job, like not just any job, but a career that I enjoy. And I want Tom to be like not spoilt but have everything he needs. I would like to be able to teach him things and take him on holidays and stuff; so financial security is really important for me ... be in a good relationship, like a lot better than I was in, and yeah, not living in Department of housing - outreach parent

I want to be working in events definitely. I would like a house of our own. I would like Craig to have a job that he wants and that he is comfortable doing. I want Danielle to be happy at school. If we have another kid in that time that they are healthy and happy - outreach parent

Young Parents Program focuses on the strengths of individuals to build their capacities, connect them into networks and empower them to be resilient and successful parents. Young Parents Program is underpinned by indicators that the challenges faced by vulnerable, disadvantaged families require multiple complex responses. To this end, Young Parents Program clients are offered a range of services and supports such as case management, home visiting from qualified caseworkers, parenting programs, education for training assistance, subsidised childcare. Learning to be a successful parent involves much more than just case management around good parenting. It includes the cultivation of trusting and sustainable social networks, securing housing, learning about nutrition and budgeting. It involves learning how to advocate for yourself and your child, and accessing opportunities to education, training or employment. The combination of these factors works towards helping parents to become successful, independent and resilient members of their communities.

Significant challenges faced in the ongoing development of Young Parents Program are identified in this research. With a considerable proportion of Young Parents Program clients being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, the program would benefit significantly from the inclusion of Indigenous employees and an Indigenous specific residential unit. The shift towards working with fathers (where fathers are involved in parenting with the mother) signals the need to adopt a two-parent model in family restoration; and therefore the need to appoint male staff.

Further Research

Development of options for longitudinal research
Red Cross promotional literature states that the organisation commits to working with disadvantaged communities for 10 to 15 years recognising the importance of long term partnerships. Equally this translates into the research domain. Short term evaluations can
provide limited insights based on findings whereas longitudinal research can provide an in-depth, rich evidence-base. We propose Red Cross explore the best ways to incorporate longitudinal research into the experiences of young parents participating in Young Parents Program to really track the outcomes and impacts on the clients and their children over time. The strategies to be explored might include the nature of social capital and social inclusion; the different scales at which longitudinal studies can operate; observing the ethical issues involved in research with marginalised youth and their children.

**More research needed on what attracts clients to Aftercare**

Case managers are interested in what attracts the clients to Aftercare; are they just getting the ones that have done really well so they feel safer being a part of Aftercare? What is the transition from Outreach to Aftercare like - do clients feel supported or abandoned? Do they perceive that in Aftercare they can deal with a crisis better?

**Expansion of Services**

We know that young people in both country and city areas often face complex pressures and stresses and may leave home after a period of strain resulting in a domestic crisis. In some areas, particularly country regions, a lack of local services and support means domestic problems within families may reach crisis point before assistance is found. A program such as Young Parents Program would be well placed in regional centres such as Dubbo, Kempsey, Moree and other areas of locational disadvantage throughout NSW.

**Resourcing**

“In Residential the demands of eight clients and their children are complex. Residential clients are typically the most vulnerable clients”. This fits with the Red Cross mandate to assist the most vulnerable people in society and reconnect marginalised people back into their communities in meaningful and sustainable ways. Building capacities is a strengths based approach that Young Parents Program utilises to do this.

**Community hubs in regional offices**

In discussions with staff and volunteers about addressing the expansion of Young Parents Program, the most prominent suggestion was to build on the strength of the function of Young Parents Program as a successful community hub, and develop more community hubs situated in regional offices. The regional offices of Red Cross have this capacity in their infrastructure such as the training rooms and meeting rooms where information sessions, Parent Education, playgroups and so on could be operated from. Research into integrated community service hubs found that communities faced with the possibility of a hub placed in their community felt they would like to use it for child care to enable them to enter or re-enter the workforce or study for a qualification with socialisation as the second most
frequently cited benefit associated with the hub (Tennent, Tayler, and Farrell 2002). Additionally, many participants in their study believed that the community hub would be a catalyst for drawing the community together as well as being a venue for healthcare, education, child care and recreation services.

**Infuse quality into the time we have with the children of the clients**

Every week the children of the clients are at Young Parents Program while their parents study, attend classes, have case management meetings and so forth. The staff at Young Parents Program indicated that they would like to develop that opportunity “to do with them what we’re doing with their parents” (staff member). While the parents attend their activities the children are in the activities room and outside in the play area with volunteers. Many of these children have speech issues, learning delays, all those early attachment issues that we weren’t there early enough to prevent. Recognising that social exclusion can be averted, suggestions from staff included bringing speech therapists, occupational and psychologists in to the program to develop individual programs for the children working with the volunteers and the case managers to keep that going.

**Extending the Aftercare program**

Many of the clients are beyond the age of 25 years old as they transition through the program and have children starting school. There would be great benefit in continuing to work with these young parents to provide them the skills to help their children do well at school, initiate good homework practices therefore encouraging the importance of education. Perhaps a volunteer service could be developed around this.
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